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Equipping Language Educators at Scale: Open Educational Resources and Institutional Collaboration for Professional Development and Practice.

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Introduction

In much of South Asia (e.g. India, Bangladesh, Sri-Lanka) there had been a post-colonial emphasis on the use of mother tongue. For instance, in Bangladesh, a nation *almost solely founded on the basis of the language movement (Bhasa Andolon) of 1952. About 98% of the country's population speak Bangla . Bangla was the medium of education at all levels except* in a small number of schools (Hossain and Tollefson, in Power and Shrestha, 2009). However, in an increasingly globalised world, English Language is now re-emerging as a significant factor in economic development. It is widely perceived that many graduates fail to gain employment because their English skills or qualifications fall below the required level of functional literacy. (British Council, 2009).

It has therefore become paramount to develop effective skills in the use of spoken and written English and some governments have been taking measures to address this need. For instance, the *Bangladeshi government in collaboration with the Department for International Development (DFID) of the UK government jointly funded the English Language Teaching Improvement Project (ELTIP)*. (Power and Shrestha, 2009, p.2). But research evidence (Power and Shrestha, 2009, p.2) show that, despite the huge investments since the early 2000s, the quality of English remains low. This indicates that more needs to be done, or it needs to be done differently.

There is therefore a need to train or upskill large numbers of English Language Teachers (ELTs), both in relation to their own level of English Language proficiency, and in relation to their teaching skills and practices. The situation calls for responses that are effective, imaginative, and capable of operating scale. It may possible for such responses to transcend national boundaries, whilst recognizing local teacher identities and contexts.

A different approach to teaching and learning?

Open and Distance Education is often used to teach or train large number of students for it presents real advantages on more conventional methods of course presentation.

Even if it were possible for conventional schools, colleges, universities or training institutions to accommodate physically the number of teachers to be upskilled (Deane, 2006, Banks et al, *tbp*), the retraining of teachers may call them away from their classroom and leave pupils without teachers for significant amount of times. Open and Distance Learning (ODL) enables students to study in their own time, and allows them to keep their employment, continue to care for their families and to hold their responsibility in their community. For these reasons, ODL is particularly suited to female students (Deane, 2006a).

ODL models of teacher education also allow teachers in remote areas to have access to upskilling, when attending a conventional course would involve long travel – often slow because of poor infrastructure – , extra cost, possibly time away from personal commitments and responsibilities. By allowing teachers the same access to education wherever they live, ODL allows well trained and well qualified teachers to be operational in all regions of a country, restoring the equilibrium of provision and quality of knowledge and practice between urban and rural environments (Deane, 2006a).

ODL courses are usually of high quality as they need to be comparable, if not better than conventional ones (Banks et al, *ibp*) ; the assessment of student learning and progress on such courses is usually rigorous, to ensure comparability with other similar qualifications. (Deane 2006b).

In the case of English language teacher training, multi-media can be used to provide access to authentic materials, at the teachers convenience. When teachers prepare lessons, they have easy access to these materials, which can also provide good models to their pupils. The interaction between what teachers need to know for their teaching and the ODL course materials can have a high impact not only on the teachers' own learning but also on the work in the classroom . Indeed the classroom becomes the place where the teachers practise their learning alongside pupils – the pronunciation practice that must be led accurately, the grammatical explanation they need to be very clear about are as many practical exercises that help them learn. They become Vygotsky's (1978) 'more knowledgeable individual'.

While presenting real advantages, ODL courses also present some constraints that need to be considered for them to be fully effective. The rigour of the assessment can mean over-assessing which is burdensome to students and not always cost effective (Banks et al, *ibp*, p. x). Student progress also needs to be tracked and reported: tracking tools and costs need to be considered at the inception of the course. “Frank and assiduous monitoring and evaluation, and improvements following from the results, are critical to the long term success of ODL initiatives.” (Calvert 2006). These need to be put in place very early on. Last but not least, it is crucial that ODL course be costed accurately as they are being planned: “Sadly –despite many claims to the contrary – sound and rigorous financial planning is often omitted in new projects and institutions seeking to harness the potential of distance education methods.” (Butcher and Roberts, 2004)

One approach to reducing the cost of producing high quality ODL materials may be found in the Open Educational Resources (OER) movement, where educational resources are freely shared, used, adapted and shared back within an open community of users.

Open Education Resources: Free, shared and collaborative

The OER movement “offers the promise of free educational resources available across the globe through the world wide web” and could be considered as a means to equalise knowledge around the globe (Wolfenden, 2008). OERs are free, can be copied, adapted and developed by users, (provided sources are quoted) and, according to the license under which they operate, invite users to share their adapted resources with the user community.

OERs enable users to use materials they need for their specific purpose, to tailor them to their local needs (Hylén, J, OECD). As the following example will illustrate, OERs can be produced at continent level, but in their adapted version, remain totally relevant to a range of very local contexts.

A model of south-south collaboration in OERs for teacher professional development

‘perhaps the most successful of all the OER projects we have heard about is TESSA, the consortium on mainly African institutions that are using OERs to empower teachers and change pedagogy in countries all over Africa’.

Sir John Daniel (2008)

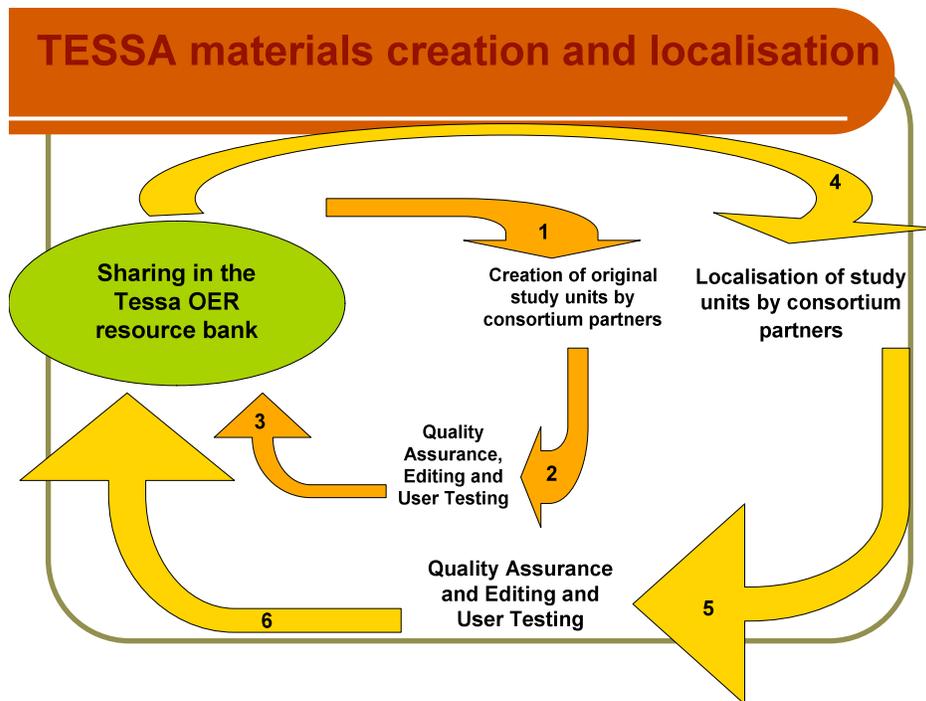
TESSA represents Africa’s largest teacher education research community, extending across thirteen institutions in Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, Rwanda, South Africa, Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia together with international organizations.

TESSA’s key purpose is to use the power of this Africa-wide consortium to improve access to, and raise the quality of, all aspects of teacher education and training. Specifically, the TESSA OERs (including text, audio and other media) focus on developing teachers’ classroom practice in the key curriculum areas of language, mathematics, science, social studies and the arts, and life skills.

To achieve this, the TESSA consortium has developed an extensive range of high quality, multilingual open educational resources (OERs) and systems. At their heart are activities for teachers to carry out in classrooms, to improve teaching and learning. The resources are designed to support all teachers, including those with little or no formal training.

“I have enjoyed using the materials because they make classroom activities simple and easy...Pupils are now improving in their performance and it has helped me improve my teaching skills.” Student teacher, Nigeria

The TESSA OERs provide a number of starting points for active experimentation within teachers’ own classrooms, the site of teachers’ learning. The activities extend teacher’s understanding of the fundamental principles of effective learning. They offer connections between ideas, strategies and subjects, and emphasise the importance of teacher’s own reflections on their experiences.



Collaborative materials creation started with an initial core of study units across the five curriculum areas. In each curriculum area, a multi-national team of authors worked to create the first iteration of the TESSA materials. Teams drew on case studies, experiences and existing resources from across the region. Curriculum authoring teams were facilitated by a team leader from an African institution, supported by a partner from the Open University, who worked together to ensure consistency and progression within the materials.

These draft materials were refined through consortium workshops and developmental testing in each of the nine countries and subject to rigorous quality assurance procedures. A key feature of this common core is its highly structured nature. This is designed to enable efficient creation of materials, as well as cost-effective and easy localization for particular contexts.

'The TESSA materials are easily located in the environment around us without having to travel long distances at high cost, thereby having first hand experience at less cost' Teacher, Tanzania

The original core materials have then been contextualized or localized into ten country-formats, including versions in Arabic, French and Kiswahili. The localization, undertaken by teams of teacher educators in each country, adapted the materials to reflect the local place and culture, curriculum, school environment and language. In total the TESSA consortium has created seven hundred and fifty study units.

The capacity and flexibility of TESSA OERs allows for a wide variety of implementation models, for both pre- and in-service courses and at informal, institutional and national levels.

Through the TESSA collaboration, all consortium institutions have well developed plans for integration and use of the TESSA OERs into a range of different courses and programmes, involving up to 500,000 teachers in 2009 to 2010.

“Using these resources is the best way to teach... I have used group discussions which resulted in good responses from my students, who have thoroughly understood the lessons... I have found myself as a teacher...” Student teacher, Sudan

Transferability of the TESSA model, to ELT in South Asia

Firstly let us emphasize that it is not the TESSA OERs themselves that we are considering, but the *processes* of institutional collaboration and implementation that enabled the development of those OERs. What, if anything, may be learned from the model of OER production and implementation across the TESSA consortium, that might usefully be applied to the large-scale production of OERs for improving ELT across South Asia?

The TESSA model was developed to enable a large number of teacher training institutes (TTIs) in Sub-Saharan Africa to work together, to improve access to, and the quality of, teacher training programmes. In particular, TESSA was for primary school teachers, delivering basic education.

Whilst acknowledging that second-language learning has some distinctive features compared to other areas of the curriculum, and that there are numerous social, demographic and geographic differences between Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, there are some common issues

For example, there are multiple and complex challenges in providing high quality educational opportunities in many developing nations: there are issues of grade repetition, low leaving age, teacher absenteeism, teacher shortages, building shortages, double shifts and large class sizes (Glewe & Kramer, 2005), as well as a predominance of under-trained or un-trained teachers (UNESCO 2000, UNESCO 2005). Such a description is likely to be recognized by teachers and teacher educators as reflecting reality ‘on the ground’ in both South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa.

Equally, in both sub-continent, teacher education programmes face challenges associated with rurality, where a lack of infrastructure (in relation to transport and communication) contributes to isolation from sources of professional training and support. Indeed the challenges of educational improvement are often most acutely experienced in rural areas (Mulkeen 2005), where 70% of the worlds poor live (FAO & UNESCO, 2003, p27).

Another relevant point is that in collaborating on the production and implementation of teacher professional development activities and resources, the TESSA consortium have

had to work in a broad range of institutional, regional and national contexts, reaching across differences of language, religion and culture. Any attempt to foster inter-institutional and international collaboration to improving ELT in South Asia is likely to face similar challenges.

Thus we acknowledge the many differences between ELT and basic education, between Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, yet we also point to two broad areas of similarity:

- the practical challenges faced ‘on the ground’ in implementing teacher change and school improvement strategies;
- the organizational challenges faced in fostering inter-institutional and international collaboration, across national, cultural, religious and linguistic divides.

We therefore tentatively suggest that aspects of the model developed through TESSA to meet these challenges can be applied to fostering inter-institutional and international collaboration in the development and application of OERs to improve ELT in South Asia.

Towards a collaborative model: achieving authentic pedagogy.

The conceptual keys to developing the collaborative processes that enable and sustain TESSA cluster around themes of commonality and difference.

Firstly, terms of commonality, partners must work together to try and identify a shared core curriculum of ELT; common notions of what it means to be a ‘good teacher’ and the characteristics of ‘good practice’. To go beyond rhetoric, such notions must be exemplified, for example, by looking at how a particular aspect of the curriculum might be taught well, in different contexts or classrooms. In TESSA, such ideas of commonality were developed through a process of collaborative authoring between institutions, as described in previous sections.

It is possible that CLT might already be beginning to provide a common framework for ELT in South Asia:

“Language learning and teaching methodology has undergone various changes over the last four decades in search of effective methods: moving from a traditional grammar-translation method to more student-centred methods such as Total Physical Response, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and Task-Based Learning (TBL) which are more popular among language teachers (see Richards and Rodgers 2001 for an overview). CLT, in particular, appears to be appealing to many teachers. Although teachers from different parts of the world have viewed CLT differently, it is widespread in the ELT world. (Power & Shrestha, ibid, p1).

A further aspect to commonality is in the conceptual development of shared understandings about the inter-relationship between teacher-learning and teacher-practice.

Another important component of CLT, though not researched extensively, is the activity or task used in the teaching and learning process, which is implicitly driven

by a theory of learning... Drawing upon the activity theory developed in Vygotskian socio-cultural theory of learning (Engeström 1999; Lantolf and Thorne 2006; Vygotsky 1978). (Power & Shrestha, ibid).

In such a frame, the process of teaching and learning takes place through shared activity, where people enact different roles, using tools, symbols and language, to achieve particular goals and purposes. This suggests that the teachers' learning, the teachers' practice, and the pupils' learning are all intertwined and bound up together in the shared activity of the classroom.

Following on from this, there is a need to develop a common set of activities or tasks, for teachers to engage in that forms the basis of their professional learning. These activities need to be purposeful (the teacher has a clear reason for carrying them out) and supported (by appropriate tools, resources, language and roles).

The second cluster of processes relate to difference.

It is rarely possible to take educational materials, resources or activities developed for one context and use them in another without adaptation. This is because *Authentic pedagogy* (Leach & Moon, 2008, p28) acknowledges the identity of the learner, and is relevant to the contexts in which it occurs.

Therefore, a teacher professional development course must both acknowledge the identities of the teachers taking part in it, and be relevant to the contexts (of language, culture, religion, state, region, curriculum, schools and so forth...) in which it is set. This is exemplified by the University of Fort Hare's Primary B.Ed. Distance Education Programme (DEP), aimed at teachers serving in schools in one of the most rural, and previously marginalized provinces of South Africa, in a national context of emerging democratic transformation and curriculum reform.

"It was a programme for and of it's time... developed when policy was not yet fixed and there was time and space for dreaming and doing... We wanted to speak into the Eastern Cape context: the rural, underdeveloped, neglected corners of the province... to transform peoples lives..." (extract from conversation between DEP programme directors, quoted in Leach & Moon, ibid, p26).

So whilst there may be commonality in terms of a core ELT curriculum and effective ELT practices, these will be implemented differently in each setting, to reflect the identity of teachers engaging with the course, and the contexts in which they teach.

In the TESSA model, *Authentic Pedagogy* is achieved through the process of localization described earlier: taking the common core of curriculum knowledge and pedagogic practice, and articulating that to acknowledge the identities of particular groups of teachers, and to make it relevant to the specific contexts of teachers' schools and teacher training institutions.

Conclusion

Across much of South Asia, there has been a post-colonial emphasis on raising the status and use of the mother tongue. In an increasingly globalised economy, English language is re-emerging as an essential skill, the lingua franca of economic and social participation. There is a broad perception that for many, current ELT practices are insufficiently effective in developing English language competencies. Teachers need support in developing their own English language competencies, as well as their teaching skills.

There is evidence that supported ODL is an effective methodology for upskilling teachers, and in particular, for bringing about changes in classroom practice, as the classroom becomes the site of teacher learning. Developing ODL resources can be onerous and costly for individual institutions. OERs have been shown to facilitate the collaborative development of ODL resources for teacher professional development, across the African Sub-Continent, through the TESSA consortium.

The model of collaboration in TESSA, with its emphasis on identifying and building upon commonality and difference, may provide some insights into possible modes of collaboration in ELT improvement across South Asia.

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