



Use and Reuse of OER: professional conversations with language teachers

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In the last ten years prestigious Open Education Resources projects have been set up, often with generous support from funders. Funders and institutions that support OER want evidence of their use and reuse; it seems, however, that OER have not yet been widely adopted by teachers as part of their daily practice.

This paper investigates the use and reuse of OER from a subject-specific repository for language teachers. In particular, the small scale study investigates how and why language teachers use OER in their teaching and rework existing resources. It also examines whether the teachers understand the resources and how to use and adapt them effectively, as an inability to do so has been considered an impediment to their reuse (Dimitriadis *et al.*, 2009; Conole, 2010b).

One of the difficulties in working with open resources and open practices is that “the open is the enemy of the knowable” (Beetham, 2011): investigating

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the adoption of OER and open practices is indeed not without difficulty, and this study proposes a qualitative enquiry based around professional conversations to investigate use and reuse of OER.

The research found that, far from not engaging in reuse, the teachers in the study did adapt OER, although most of those changes were not published again. In addition, they drew on considerable professional knowledge when considering the use and reuse of OER for their lessons.

The current study suggests that evidence of use and reuse cannot simply be gathered through metrics; some of the reuse and sharing is not necessarily visible, and sharing might not always be appropriate. It is possible that the adoption of more open educational practices will result in reuse and sharing of both resources and practices becoming more visible in the future but, for now, more research is needed to provide evidence of the “invisible” reuse and sharing.

1 Introduction: Open Educational Resources - sharing and reuse

Open Educational Resources are teaching and learning resources, software, and any other tools made available under an intellectual property (IP) license that allows for the “free use or re-purposing by others” (William & Flora Hewlett Foundation, 2008), usually under Creative Commons licences.

The twin concepts that underpin OER are sharing and reuse (Masterman & Wild, 2011). Lane and McAndrew (2010) suggest that, traditionally, teachers have worked on their own, creating their own resources with the technologies they are most familiar with for their particular teaching context and student group. They might have shared resources in their small communities of teachers teaching similar courses, possibly at the same institution, and engaged in minimal reuse of materials. They argue, however, that OER make it easier for teachers to find other teachers’ resources and that this can inform their own practice. Open access to OER, moreover, enables teachers easily to use someone else’s resource in their teaching, rework other people’s material, and even co-create (or remix) materials with others.

However, it would appear that, notwithstanding the affordances of OER, and in spite of the growing number of prestigious OER collections (such as MIT’s OpenCourseWare, California State University’s MERLOT and the OU’s OpenLearn, amongst others) and the considerable support for the OER project from generous funders (such as the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation), the use of OER repositories has not yet been widely adopted by learners and teachers as part of their daily practice (Dimitriades *et al.*, 2009). As Conole (2010a) has pointed out, there seems to be a gap between “the potential of technologies for learning and their actual use in practice”. A need to investigate how best to foster teachers’ reuse of OER has also been identified by researchers (Masterman & Wild, 2011).

When considering the use and reuse of OER by teachers, it would seem wise also to look at their adoption or otherwise of Open Educational Practices (OEP), as they are also part of the OER ecosystem, which consists of content

and tools, but also processes, communities, institutions and people (Schmidt & Surman, 2007, quoted in OER Africa, 2009). OEP are collaborative practices where ‘resources are shared by making them openly available’ and where ‘pedagogical practices are employed which rely on social interaction, knowledge creation, peer learning and shared learning practices’ (OPAL, 2011a: p. 4); the aim of these open educational practices is to ‘improve quality and innovate education’ (OPAL, 2011b: p. 4).

2 Teachers’ use and reuse of OER from a subject-specific repository

This paper investigates the use and reuse of OER from a subject-specific repository for language teachers, originally designed to house OER for the Department of Languages at the UK Open University. The Open University offers language courses at a distance in six different languages. Although the courses are produced by a central team of academics, they are delivered nationally (and in the rest of Europe) via a blended model that includes part-time teachers (Associate Lecturers) working locally with students in their area. Teachers use a variety of modes to support their students, including tutorials, which can be face-to-face or online (using a synchronous audiographic conferencing system, currently Elluminate).

Materials for tutorials produced for each course by the central academic teams were originally sent to the relevant teachers via data CDs, and later made available through individual course websites. Over the years, as teachers became more experienced in using audiographic systems, they started modifying the resources provided centrally, and developing their own. However, there was no formal way of sharing these resources between ALs, nor a way of making the resources for other courses and languages available to all. After scanning the environments for possible solutions, staff at the Department of Languages settled for creating a digital repository that would be open to all staff, and to the wider language teaching community, and sought funding from HEA/JISC to develop LORO, the Languages Open Resources Online repository for language teachers (www.loro.open.ac.uk). All resources in LORO are published under a Creative Commons licence, the repository is open to all, and anyone can publish their own resources there, download, use or adapt any resources available.

The process of setting up the repository and of subsequent activities to promote engagement with LORO has been explained elsewhere (Comas-Quinn et al, 2011). Since it started, LORO has continued to grow, and currently contains a large collection of Open University tutorial resources for French, German, Spanish, Italian, Welsh, Chinese and English for Academic Purposes, as well as resources uploaded by individual teachers. LORO currently holds over 1500 individual resources and has around 1200 registered users. Being an open re-

pository, it receives around 1000 visits a month from more than 30 countries across the world. One of the features that differentiates LORO from many of the other OER repositories is that it is aimed at teachers, rather than learners. In spite of these fairly healthy figures, though, only a small number of users have uploaded their own resources, and even fewer have uploaded any derivative materials, i.e. those resources that are new versions of OER already in the repository and would thus provide evidence that the resources are being reused and repurposed by teachers.

As mentioned above, it has been argued that there is a disappointing level of adoption of OER amongst teachers, and little integration into their daily practices, possibly caused by the fact that “teachers do not fully understand the resources and therefore they cannot effectively reuse them” (Dimitriadis *et al.*, 2009). Conole (2010b) makes a similar point elsewhere, when she explains that “teachers lack the necessary skills to make informed judgements about how to use technologies and are bewildered by the possibilities”. Dimitriadis *et al.* (2009) suggest that “if the design of OER is made clearer to teachers and learners, this is likely to ultimately make resources more reusable”, and go on to explore how the design can be made more explicit through the use of Mediating Artifacts.

The aim of the current study was to investigate if the language teachers participating in the study use OER in their teaching, and if so, how and why, and whether they rework existing resources or even co-create (or remix) materials with others. The study also aimed at understanding whether these teachers make informed judgements about the use of OER using their personal tacit knowledge (Eraut, 1994), and attempted to make that knowledge explicit.

3 Investigating openness through professional conversations

As Beetham has pointed out, openness is the enemy of knowability (Beetham, 2011), and this has implications for researching OER and OEP, especially in the area of use and reuse of resources. Metrics (including analytics) have often been used to evaluate OER projects, and impact is also evaluated via user questionnaires and surveys (e.g. MIT, 2011). Although there is a considerable amount of quantitative data available on LORO, provided through Google Analytics and other statistical packages embedded into the repository itself, this investigation adopted a qualitative approach, which seemed to be more aligned to researching individual practice, and more suitable when exploring a fairly under-researched area where the questions to investigate are still emerging (Masterman & Wild, 2011; Braun & Clarke, 2006).

For the research, it was important to understand phenomena in their setting and to be able to capture and describe the phenomena from the perspectives

of those involved. It was also important to look at specific instances of OER use, rather than gather data that was more general or abstract; therefore, it was decided to research teachers as they were preparing a specific synchronous language lesson (tutorial). The aim was to look at specific OER (or other resources) teachers were planning to use in their tutorial, and find out how they were thinking of using those resources and why, and if they were foreseeing making any changes to the original resource. For this reason, I observed teachers as they were preparing a particular tutorial, and met them again after the lesson to review it together. Professional conversations were used as the main method for data gathering.

Professional conversations are “discussions among those who share a complex task or profession in order to improve their understanding of, and efficacy in what they do” (Britt *et al.*, 2001, p. 31). In the context of education, the aim of professional conversations is to provide opportunities for teachers to engage in professional learning, and they can take place for instance after an observation of teaching, or in a more ad hoc basis (Shuck *et al.*, 2008; Earl & Tymperley, 2009; Danielson, 2009). In professional conversations, the interlocutor attempts to move the conversation beyond merely providing a rationalisation of the current practice by asking provocative questions or seeking clarification (Schuck *et al.*, 2008), and thus endeavours to “maximize thoughtfulness on the part of the teacher” and explore, where relevant, alternative courses of action (Danielson, 2009). As Senge (1990a) puts it, ‘learningful conversations [...] balance inquiry and advocacy’ and provide opportunities for people to ‘expose their own thinking effectively and make that thinking open to the influence of others’. The use of professional conversations seemed to offer a flexible framework to explore the way in which individual teachers were responding to the OER in LORO and the ensuing Open Practices their use might entail.

The study focused on specific instances of use and reuse of OER by experienced online and distance language teachers for a specific teaching purpose, in this case an online tutorial for their group of students. I observed the lesson preparation of eight teachers who teach on the French, Spanish or Italian beginners’ courses at the Open University, and conducted professional conversations with them. The teachers were covering comparable topics and language for this level and stage in the courses (functional topics including: introductions, asking for and giving personal information, expressing numbers including prices, expressing location, asking for and giving directions, and describing buildings; grammatical topics including: conjugation of verbs in the present indicative, adjectival agreement, prepositional phrases). The resources available in LORO for the different languages are fairly similar, and some are indeed adaptations of the same resource to the different languages. At the same time, there are a number of different resources for the different languages, so it also provided

an opportunity to find out if teachers looked at resources from other languages in preparation for their classes. Although it was fairly early in the beginning of the course, the teachers had all had the opportunity to meet their students at least once. Often they had met already once in a face-to-face setting, and once on Elluminate, the audiographic conferencing system used to conduct synchronous online tutorials, so the tutorials we were discussing were usually the third or fourth of the year. After the tutorial, I scheduled another meeting for the AL to review the lesson with me, in an attempt to shed some light into what is often a very individual and solitary but nevertheless pedagogically important process of personal evaluation.

The data collection took place on Elluminate, the platform that OU teachers use for their teaching. This was partly for the sake of convenience (using a tool participants were familiar with, ability to record, play back and save the session), but also because Elluminate is an audiographic system, so that it enabled us to look at resources together, and to share applications. In that way participants were able to share their desktop with me as they looked at the resources in LORO and talked me through which ones they were going to use, why and how. This enabled me to literally see what they saw, but also to understand how they approached the repository, how they navigated around it, found resources, and previewed them. Similarly, by asking teachers to upload the whiteboards they were using in their lesson, I was able to see exactly what they were using – which also provided me with unexpected information about their technical skills, for instance.

The study used mixed methods including the recorded and transcribed observation and conversations with the participants for subsequent thematic analysis, and the resources teachers used or repurposed for their teaching were also analysed. The data was analysed in NVivo using a categorising strategy, namely thematic analysis, a data-driven approach that has been shown to be useful when working in an under-researched area or if the views of participants are not known, and which has proved helpful in generating unanticipated insights (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

4 Teachers' use and reuse of OER

The main finding of the study is that, far from not engaging in reuse, and contrary to the findings in the literature (which are not discipline-specific), the participants often adapted the OER they used. The ways in which the language teachers reused resources from the repository include:

- getting inspiration from existing resources (sometimes in other languages or at other levels) in order to create new ones;
- making some small changes to the OER to make them more attractive/

- personalise them (e.g. changes to design, font, photos, colours);
- making some small changes to the OER by adding key language expressions or structures to provide additional support to students.

Sometimes a resource was used without making any physical changes to it, but the pedagogical aim was transformed (e.g. turning an activity to practice a grammar structure into one to practice vocabulary, for instance). Sometimes this was planned, and sometimes it was ‘improvised’ during the lesson, to account for the number of students present, the students’ abilities and needs, the need to change the pace of the lesson, or the teacher’s wish to experiment, for instance.

New resources based on existing LORO resources included the welcome screen that teachers put up before the tutorials to welcome students as they come in to the Elluminate room, so resources that almost by their nature are designed to be altered by the user.

Teachers also created completely new resources to fulfil a perceived gap in the LORO materials, or other classroom management and “phatic” resources, such as screens with the lesson outcomes and final screens with good wishes for the Christmas period.

The following chart summarises the types of use and reuse of resources from LORO.

Use and reuse of resources from LORO in tutorials

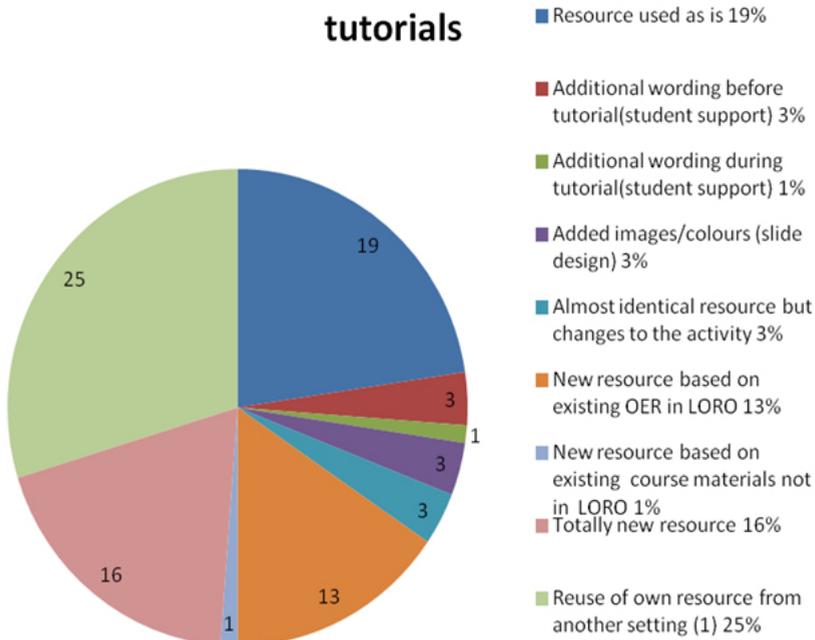


Fig. 1 - Use and reuse of OER by teachers in the tutorials

Whilst it can be argued that some of the changes to OER were fairly minimal, teachers justified changes to the design or the inclusion of additional wording through coherent arguments about online learning and the affordances of Elluminate. Indeed, through the professional conversations and the observations, some of the teachers' implicit knowledge was made explicit, illustrating how their professional practice is grounded on personal knowledge, the "vast repertoire of experiential knowledge that [people] draw on for making any one of the split second decisions that are a feature of everyday practice" (Polanyi, 1958). The types of knowledge teachers drew on included subject knowledge, knowledge about the course and the students, technical knowledge, especially about Elluminate, pedagogic knowledge, both in language teaching and in teaching online via an audiographic system, emotional/affective knowledge, and knowledge of other resources in LORO, amongst others. This finding seems to show that the teachers in the study do indeed understand the OER and are able to reuse them effectively, contrary to the claim by Dimitriadis *et al.* (2009) that this is not usually the case.

The following explanation by the participants about why she always adapts resources is illustrative of the teachers' arguments about reuse:

I think it's very good, the idea of sharing, because you've got the resources there, but I think it's better to adapt, or adjust what you've got there, in LORO, [...] and readapt or readjust what has been done according to your own needs... whatever somebody else did or prepared for their class I always had to tweak or change a little bit, even if it was just including the target language on the screen, or even if it were just changing a couple of icons, I always had to touch them a little bit...

Why do you think that is?

Well, because we all have different groups, we have [students of] different abilities, we know our groups, we know what they need, we get to know our students, we know how they work, we know the level of the group, so you change, you always have to change a little bit, adapt a little bit...

Another finding of the study is that although most language teachers make changes to the resources they select from the repository, they do not publish their changes in LORO. Although in principle sharing is perceived as a positive thing by participants in the study, the barriers to sharing included lack of time, worries about copyright, concerns about sharing with strangers and worries about appearing vain or arrogant in front of colleagues, and echo those in the OER literature (Byskov Lund, 2010). Interestingly, teachers perceived the changes they make to resources as being very personal, to fit with their own teaching styles or tastes, or with their students' needs, and they explained that they did not necessarily perceive the resulting resources as being useful to others, which is one of the reasons they were not published again. After explaining the changes she had made to a resource, one teacher commented:

I think it works better for me like this [the resource] but I'm not sure it would work better for others like this, they might prefer to keep it more simple, or they might put all these sentences on the text chat. Or they might just do it differently.

However, it is important to understand that not publishing resources in the LORO repository does not mean that the resources are not shared. Several teachers in the study explained that, rather than sharing through LORO, many shared teaching ideas or resources in the course forums set up for teachers on the same course, so that the sharing took place in a more intimate setting with closer colleagues. Some teachers also shared their resources with students, by saving all the presentations they had used in class onto a powerpoint file that they sent to all their students, even those that had not attended the lesson. Some also recorded their class (via screencasting) and sent the link of the recording

to all their students.

Finally, several teachers mentioned that they had found the professional conversations about their use and reuse of OER to be useful and interesting, and that they made them reflect on open educational practices. One of them explained:

It's probably prompting more reflection than I would normally do, to be honest, because right now I would be thinking about [assignments] and answering a lot of e-mail queries so, yes, it's probably prompting more reflection and also we are used to working on our own, so prompting more thoughts about sharing with others [...] I think it might be interesting just to share with tutors on the same course, [...] at some point to show what we have done with the resources...

And another said:

...You don't have many chances to reflect on what you do, so it's a very good opportunity for me to reflect on what I do... it'll be also interesting to know, without obviously knowing names, what other colleagues think about all this...

5 Limitations and further research

The current study has a number of limitations. First of all, the number of participants was small (eight, or about 8% of the Associate Lecturer body in the Department of Languages). How representative participants are of the whole cohort is an issue, particularly as the selection of participants was done through selective sampling. Further studies will need to be conducted using larger number of participants, recruited randomly or systematically, or using quota or dimensional sampling (Cohen & Manion, 1994) to verify the results. The other important limitation with the current study, and with the research design, is that teachers were only observed before and after one tutorial. In order to begin to understand the changing nature of OEP, a longitudinal study might need to be conducted, as the adoption of new practices takes time.

Conclusion: evaluating the success of the OER project

The issue of whether OER are reused and shared, and where and how this takes place, is an important one. Funders and institutions that support OER want evidence that resources are being used and reused, and this is often done through metrics and analytics. This study suggests that this might not represent an accurate picture of current practice, as some of the reuse and sharing is not necessarily visible, because it is not published in the OER repositories

the OER originally come from, but happens through other informal or more private ways.

There are also signs that the “current shift in focus from the simple production and sharing of open educational resources towards wider concepts such as open educational practices and cultures” mentioned by Ossiannilsson and Creelman in this journal (2012) is beginning to take place: some of the teachers in the study expressed an interest in finding out about the practice of others, and were keen to have opportunities to share resources and practices, and to develop opportunities for social learning, highlighting the usefulness of the professional conversations for their professional learning.

It is hoped that the adoption of more open educational practices will result in reuse and sharing of both resources and practices becoming more visible in the future, but it is also important that research into teachers’ use and reuse of OER continues to explore practices which are not necessarily public in order to evaluate the success of the OER project.

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