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# **The evaluation and re-use of Open Educational Resources in language teaching – a case study**

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## ***Abstract***

The use of digital resources to support language teaching and learning in higher education has become standard practice in recent years. A particular type of digital resources are Open Educational Resources (OERs), defined as: ‘...teaching, learning and research resources that reside in the public domain or have been released under an intellectual property licence that permits their free use or re-purposing by others.’ (Atkins, et al., 2007). While the creation and uploading of OERs has been widely researched, there is little evidence about OERs’ evaluation and re-use. This study investigates the criteria, applied by the language teachers, while evaluating OERs. It considers the type of changes most commonly made to the original resources and identifies the reasons for the changes made. The research is a case study based on four interviews with teachers of beginners French in a distance learning course.

The initial findings indicate that teachers look for easily accessible and downloadable materials that are from a reliable source. They value good quality, interactive and student-centred materials. The findings also show that, even when resources meet all the criteria teachers are looking for, they will adapt the resources not only to fit their own teaching styles, but their approach and beliefs about online teaching.

This study will be of relevance to course developers and language teachers who are interested in developing OERs that can cater for a range of objectives as well as a variety of teaching and learning styles.

## ***Keywords***

OERs, re-use, re-purpose, material adaptation, language teaching, appropriation

## ***Introduction***

This study investigates the use and re-use of digital resources for language teaching at a distance education institution, The Open University (UK). It aims to build on the experience and achievements of the Open Educational Resources (OER) movement. Research in this field shows that although there has been a trend to populate repositories with free accessible online materials, like OpenLearn, for example, and that there is some evidence that digital resources are being used increasingly, there is little literature exploring how they are being used in the virtual classroom.

McAndrew, et al. (2012) point out that it is now important to consider the impact of OER and the types of evidence that are being generated across initiatives, organisations and individuals. They argue that wide interest in itself is not enough to build new approaches and collaborations.

There is a need for researchers to monitor activities, identify the actions that people are taking and examine their impact. They have, as a consequence, set the central challenges for the OER movement in the form of twelve key issues available as a framework for researchers. The fourth challenge identified by McAndrew et al. is: 'what evidence is there of use (and re-use) of OER?' They suggest that although by its very nature OER use is often difficult to analyse, OER projects need to do a better job of recording successes and providing evidence about re-use and re-appropriation. It is also suggested that any lack of reliable evidence might be viewed in one of three ways:

- That there is in fact little reuse;
- That there is reuse but it is not visible, or;
- That the accepted definition of reuse is not a useful one and we should focus on value to the user rather than be concerned with labelling particular instances of activity.

### ***The aims of the project***

This small-scale study is an attempt to provide evidence of re-use and adaptation of online resources. It was conducted with a small pool of teachers on the French beginners' course at the Open University (OU). The Department of Languages (DoL) at the OU has been offering a total of 18 language courses in 7 different languages under its successful model of supported distance learning since 1995, as described by Coleman and Vialleton (2011). Students work independently with structured learning materials produced by OU course developers (books, study guides, audio-visual and web-based materials), and are supported by a regionally-based part-time teacher who offers advice, individualised feedback on assignments and regular synchronous group tutorials, face-to-face and online via an online audio-visual conferencing system.

The resources created by the course developers for online teaching sessions are located in an institutional digital repository, LORO (Languages Open Resources Online). This allows all OU teachers as well as the wider language teaching community to access OU-produced online teaching materials (see Comas-Quinn, et al, 2011, for further information about LORO). Taking into account research about the affordances of an online resource, (McGreal, 2004), the team designed resources which are:

- centrally located in a repository
- designed to foster oral communication with staged interactive activities
- written to be adapted and re-used in any context
- based on the objectives of the OU French beginners' course
- accompanied by teaching guidelines
- published under a Creative Commons licence (copyrights clear)

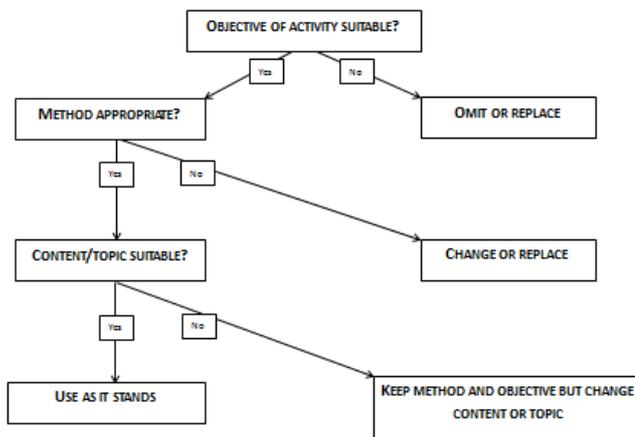
Based on the context outlined in the introduction, the aims of the small-scale study were:

- to investigate the criteria applied by the language teachers of French beginners at the OU when evaluating OERs
- to find out whether the resources were used in their original form or adapted
- to investigate the type of changes most commonly made to the original resources
- to identify the rationale for the changes made

In order to do so, we need to look at the notion of materials adaptation.

## **Materials adaptation**

Madsen and Bowen (1978) in Tomlinson (2012) point out that good teachers always adapt the materials they are using in order to achieve the optimal congruence between materials, methodology, learners, objectives, the target language and the teacher's personality and teaching style. Tomlinson (2011) argues that while evaluating and adapting materials, teachers consciously or unconsciously are guided by a set of criteria based on their own beliefs about teaching and learning. Cunningsworth (1995) in McGrath (2002) suggests a systematic path (illustrated below) through the processes of materials evaluation in relation to lesson activities.



Evaluating Lesson Activities (Cunningsworth, 1995) in McGrath (2002, p.57)

McGrath (2002) has identified four evaluative processes involved in lesson planning: selection, rejection, adding and changing and he focuses on two main categories of adaptation:

- Adaptation as **addition** (teachers provide additional examples, explanations, exercises to do more of the same or to further exploit the materials)
- Adaptation as **change** (it is a recognition that an activity does not do what it was intended to do, or does not do it as effectively or as efficiently or as interestingly as it might).

These form the theoretical framework underpinning this study.

## **Research findings**

The study was carried out by the developers of the resources two months after course start to capture use of resources at an early stage in the course.

A qualitative case study combining a mix of instruments (a questionnaire, semi-structured interviews and analysis of samples provided by participants) provided the following findings.

### **Use of digital resources**

The questionnaire revealed that 9 teachers used some or all resources provided by course developers. The main reason given by the 2 who did not use any of the resources provided was that they preferred to create their resources from scratch. The four interviews revealed that all teachers regularly use the digital repository LORO mainly to download resources for their course. They sometimes browse other resources in LORO, particularly the other OU beginners' courses. Participants said that, although they felt that they should, they do not upload their own resources because of concerns related to copyrights issues and lack of time.

### **Reasons for choosing a particular resource**

Overall teachers found the resources easily accessible, adaptable and reusable. They thought the resources fitted well with the course learning objectives. The main reason given for using the resources was that they trusted the source. However, only a minority agreed that the resources fitted their teaching style and saw a clear progression from more controlled to freer practice in the activities proposed. Teachers said that although the teaching guidelines were 'nice to have', they were not essential. Interviews revealed that teachers mainly look for ideas, inspiration, resources containing pictures and resources which proposed exercises that encourage oral communication. Teachers usually browse for visually attractive, clear and interactive resources.

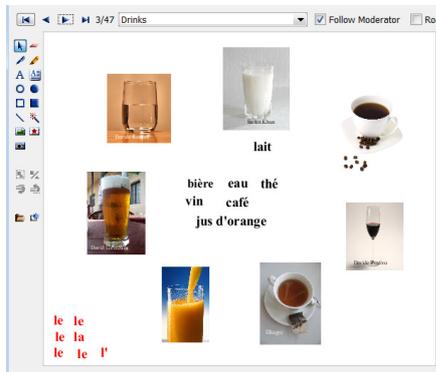
### **Adaptation of resources**

The study shows that all teachers adapt all or some of the resources they use. Some add new slides to supplement existing resources or personalise their tutorials. Others may add some text to supplement an existing resource or to expand an activity. All teachers very often change the look of a resource to personalise it. While they sometimes change the prompts of a resource to simplify or extend it, their alterations are mainly aimed at modifying the approach to fit their own teaching and learning beliefs. The following examples illustrate some of the changes made to the original resources and the rationale for the changes.

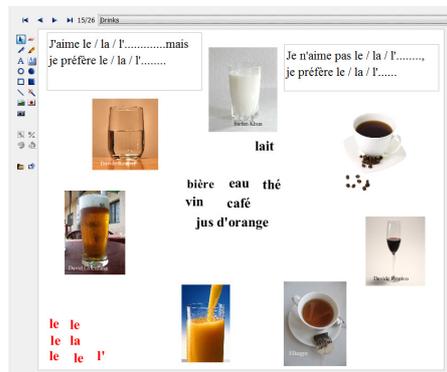
*Resource 1* (drinks) illustrates a recurrent change made by teacher 1. It was designed as part of a staged sequence to revise drinks vocabulary and genders in preparation for communicative activities.

Teacher 1 explained that, in her tutorials, she tries 'to be in a situation where the students are going to talk as much as possible'. Mostly she adds text to resources 'to give students as much oral practice as possible'. For example, verbs (j'aime/je n'aime pas...) were added to resources 1 to encourage students to make full sentences. She didn't feel a mechanical matching activity allowed students to speak enough.

Resource 1a: Original resource



Resource1b: Adapted resource

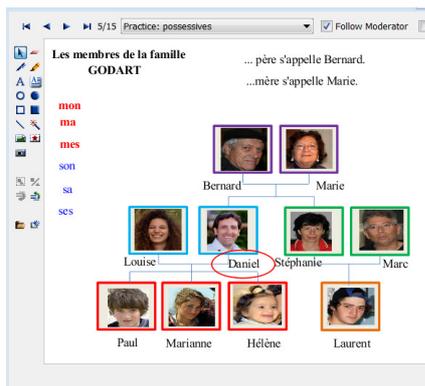


When asked whether resources created by the course developers suited the teaching approach she had just described, teacher 1 answered was: "I can work through it. It's absolutely brilliant but there is far too much really. So, yes there are tons and no problem finding something that suits me".

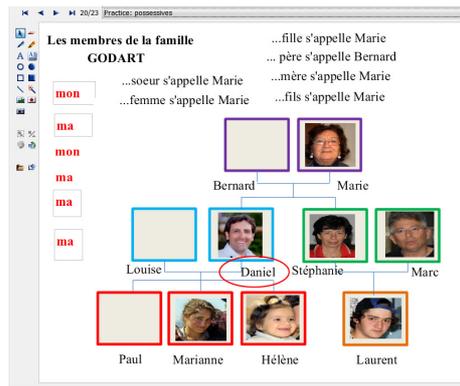
*Resource 2* (practice possessives) illustrates a recurrent change made by teacher 2. It was designed as part of a staged sequence to revise family relationship vocabulary and possessive adjectives to prepare for further communicative activities.

Teacher 2 explained that, in his tutorials, his main focus is: 'to try to get students to put together exchanges of language so trying to get beyond the situation where they are saying one thing or one word, and get them used to the idea of engaging with some sort of interlocutor even from the very basic stage'. In the main, teacher 2 modified resources to give additional support to students.

Resource 2a: Original resource



Resource2b: Adapted resource



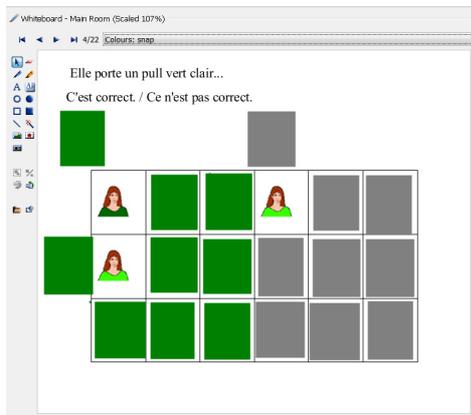
In this resource, teacher 2 added a few sentences and replaced the pronouns. He explained that he wanted: 'to make this slide quite mechanical and quite clearly defined'. He said that he didn't use the tree to practice family relationship vocabulary because he felt this ought to be used for more challenging activities, and he would use it later on in the course, for revision. When asked whether resources created by the course developers suited the teaching approach

he had just described, his answer was: “I think the materials we’ve had from you in LORO have been absolutely suited to my approach.

*Resource 3* (colours snap) illustrates a recurrent change made by teacher 3. It was designed as a game to practise basic vocabulary of colours.

Teacher 3 explained that, in her tutorial, her main focus is: ‘to check that the students are confident with the grammar’, because she felt that if they are not they would find it difficult to cope at higher levels. She said that she normally spends more time on the theoretical part in her tutorials.

### Resource 3



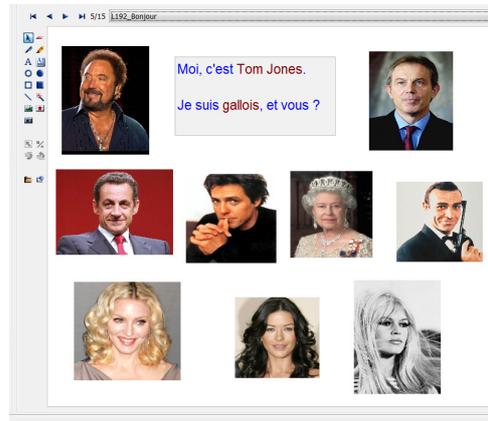
Teacher 3 used this resource in its original form but added grammar activities to it. She explained that she ‘could work with the resource’ to cover ‘the three linguistic aspects (colours, clothes and grammar) which are so important at this level’ and to revise what students had learned in the course and ‘to go a bit further and covered the agreement of the adjectives (*un pull vert* but *une blouse verte*)’. Teacher 4 liked the resources because she felt she could adapt them easily to do more grammar and to give opportunities to students to go beyond the language taught in the course materials.

*Resource 4* (nationalities) illustrates a recurrent change made by teacher 4. It was designed as part of a sequence of resources to revise adjectives of nationalities and to practise masculine/feminine agreements. It aimed to introduce the adjectives and get students to categorise them and then practise them through a game in preparation for freer practice.

Teacher 4 explained that, in her tutorials, her objective is ‘to help the students re-use the language they have been taught in the course and re-use it orally in a genuinely communicative way’.

Resource 4a: Screen not used

Resource 4b: Screen created from scratch



To achieve the same purposes, teacher 4 chose to create her own resource from scratch (Fig 4b) and did not use the proposed resource (Fig 4a). She said that she liked to use photographs of famous people to introduce nationalities. She also felt that it was important for students 'to come up with the vocabulary in that checking phase rather than giving it to them automatically'. Teacher 4 said that the resources provided by course developers fitted her teaching style 'perfectly'.

## ***Discussion of findings***

The four teachers claimed to follow a communicative approach in their teaching and it is true to say that the examples they showed confirmed this. Contrary to the results of the questionnaire, the 4 teachers who volunteered to be interviewed were all in agreement that the resources created by course developers suited their teaching approach and indicated that the objective, methods and content of activities proposed were suitable (see Cunningsworth's diagram). Yet the examples presented in this article demonstrate that all teachers adapted the resources they chose to use in some way. Sometimes they modified the content of the resource, sometimes they changed the activities, and sometimes they changed the approach. Teacher 1 preferred to add text to original resource and to extend activities to cover controlled and freer practice with the same resource rather than using the sequence of resources available to progress from controlled to freer practice. Teacher 2 also preferred to modify the resources used. He was keen to give additional prompts to students to allow for more students' autonomy and more oral exchanges. Again proposing to do more practice with a same resource rather than using the full sequence. Teacher 3 tended to use the original resource content but adapted the activities to do more grammar and develop language acquisition further. Teacher 4 wanted to encourage 'genuine' communicative tasks so sometimes designed her own screens to elicit vocabulary or structures learned previously, rather than giving the prompts to students automatically.

These findings provide strong evidence that teachers are keen to use good quality, visually attractive, easily accessible, interactive resources. This small-scale study which identifies actions that teachers are taking with the resources in their tutorials provides some visible evidence of re-use. It also shows that 're-use' can have different meanings.

This piece of research demonstrates that re-use and re-appropriation of materials is intrinsically linked to teachers' beliefs. Although teachers agree that overall resources provided by course developers fitted their teaching style and approach, which was a communicative approach, they all adapted them according to their own specific beliefs about teaching and learning. The four teachers interviewed were extremely clear and conscious about their approach but their beliefs and understanding of communicative language teaching varied considerably as shown by the

examples and the reasons evoked for the changes made. It therefore seems that adaptation does not occur to suit teaching styles and methods but to suit those strong beliefs. This study shows that material appropriation and adaptation vary quite considerably according to how teachers interpret communicative approach for online teaching.

## ***Conclusions***

Teachers browse repositories to find accessible, good quality, visually attractive and copyrights free resources that they can adapt and modify easily. This particular study focused specifically on the types of changes made to the resources and the reasons for the changes. It has shown that, even if the objectives, methods and content of the proposed activities are considered suitable, changes still occur as teachers adapt and appropriate digital materials in various ways. They may add or change a resource, modifying its content or the pedagogical approach.

Despite its limitations, due to the small number of participants, this case study seems to present similar findings to the research currently done in the field of use and re-use of OER in language teaching (Beaven, 2013) but it adds a dimension to findings as it shows that appropriation of materials does not only occur to suit teaching styles but has deeper roots as it seeks to suit strong beliefs and perceptions that teachers have of what constitutes a 'good' online session.

Further research into the frequent types of changes that are made to language resources is now needed to more closely study the relationship between teachers' beliefs and their use and re-use of OERs and the impact this may have on producing materials that would suit a range of practitioner and that would cater for a range of different beliefs.

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