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Further Investigation Into the Reuse of OERs for Language Teaching

Hélène Pulker¹

Abstract. The use of Open Educational Resources (OERs) to support language teaching and learning in higher education has become standard practice in recent years. While OER initiatives have given considerable attention to teacher's engagement as well as the sharing of culture and the creation and uploading of OERs, there is little evidence about specific reuse by teachers in the classroom. This paper builds on a previous study conducted in December 2012 and presents further reflection on the reuse of OERs for teaching French beginners online. The initial enquiry was a case study based on interviews with four teachers of an online beginners' French course at a distance education institution, the Open University, UK. The results of the initial study show that even when resources meet all the criteria teachers are looking for, material adaptation is still occurring. Teachers adapt the resources to fit their own teaching styles and gain ownership of the materials, but above all, materials are adapted according to teachers' own beliefs about online teaching. This paper revisits the types of changes made to original resources and provides further observation about the changes, suggesting that whatever the modification made to the original resource is, the pedagogical intent will always be changed. This paper is of relevance to language teaching practitioners as well as course developers who are interested in reuse of language teaching materials for online language teaching.

Keywords: OER, reuse, re-appropriation, material adaptation, online synchronous language teaching.

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1. Introduction

Teachers play a crucial role in computing-assisted language learning, making decisions that can have significant impact on students' learning experience. In the context of synchronous online language teaching, those decisions include creating materials from scratch, selecting ready-made OERs available through repositories for example, or adapting them to fit specific teaching objectives or specific contexts. Several OER projects such as MERLOT, JORUM, the LORO project at the Open University, the Humbox, the Community Café and the FAVOR projects at the University of Southampton suggest that using online content and resources is becoming increasingly normalised in language teaching. Research and scholarship initiatives related to these OER projects for language teaching (Comas-Quinn, Beaven, Pleines, Pulker, & de los Arcos, 2011; Comas-Quinn, Wild, & Carter, 2013) have given considerable attention to factors contributing to the use of OERs and teachers' engagement with Open Educational Resources and Open Educational Practices. Research reports and findings suggest that there is little need to convince academics of the value of reuse. However, there has been little focus on how the resources are specifically used or repurposed in the virtual classroom.

The report of the initial small-scale study (Pulker & Calvi, 2013), on which this paper is based, was an attempt to provide evidence of teachers' reuse and adaptation of online resources. The resources under investigation were designed broadly in line with communicative and task-based pedagogies, including stimuli for class use and methodological resources, and were also broadly based on the affordances of an online resource described by McGreal (2004). They are:

- accessible from the institutional repository LORO;
- written to be adapted and re-used in any context;
- based on specific objectives of a French beginners course (A1-A2 CEFR);
- free of copyright.

The investigation into the types of changes was based on theories on materials adaptation. Madsen and Bowen (1978, cited 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 are consciously or

unconsciously guided by a set of criteria based on their own beliefs about teaching and learning. McGrath (2002) specifically studied adaptation and suggests that there are two different forms of it:

- **addition.** Teachers will add to the content of a resource; they will provide additional examples, explanations, exercises to do more of the same or to further exploit the materials;
- **change.** Teachers will modify the resource; they will replace some of its content or reuse the resource in a different way.

The initial study's aim was to identify the most common types of adaptation made to resources. This paper focuses more closely on adaptation as change, when the changes made to a resource impact on its original pedagogical intent.

2. Method

The initial survey was conducted with four teachers who volunteered to take part in semi-structured interviews online. During the interviews, participants were asked to explain the reasons for choosing a particular resource and to outline their approach to teaching online at beginners' level. In the second part of the interview, participants provided and commented upon a few examples of resources that they had used and adapted. The semi-structured interviews revealed the complexities of explaining a teaching approach and allowed the researchers to clarify what teachers understood by the term 'communicative approach'.

3. Discussion

During the interviews, the four teachers said that they seek to adopt a communicative approach in their interactive online tutorials, although one explained that she devotes more tutorial time to grammar and to what she calls the 'theoretical aspects of the language' than to communicative activities. Generally, the examples provided by the teachers confirmed this. The cases of adaptations provided by each teacher demonstrate that their beliefs about teaching French beginners online are reflected in the changes they make when they re-appropriate the original resources. Although the four teachers were all in agreement that the resources created by course developers suited their teaching approach and they indicated that the objective, methods and content of activities proposed were suitable, the examples of adaptation they provided in the interviews demonstrate that all teachers changed the pedagogical intent of the original resource. For instance, Teacher 1 preferred to

extend the activities suggested 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 OERs used. He was keen to give additional prompts to students to allow for more student autonomy and more oral exchanges proposing to do more practice with a same resource rather than using the full sequence. Here again, the change is not to the resource itself but what he did with it. Teacher 3 tended to use the original resource content but adapted the activities to do more grammar and to develop language acquisition further. As for Teacher 4, she 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.

The initial study provided evidence of repurposing OERs for language teaching. However, the examples demonstrate that the change occurs mostly in the learning design and not so much in the content of the resources. The four teachers interviewed were extremely clear and conscious about their teaching 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 only occur to suit teaching styles and methods but to suit those strong beliefs. This paper shows that material appropriation and adaptation vary quite considerably according to how teachers interpret communicative approach for online teaching. It also shows that, no matter what the teachers adapt in the resources, they will always change their pedagogical approach. This further reflection on the types of changes also indicates that the term 'reuse' can have different meanings.

4. Conclusions

The initial study presented similar findings to the research currently done in the field of use and reuse of OERs in language teaching (Beaven, 2013; Borthwick & Dickens, 2012) which is that teachers modify the resources to suit their teaching style and what is considered as a change is not universally clear. Sometimes changing the colour of a resource, or adding a small prompt is not seen as a major change, when in fact, it is. This paper adds a dimension to findings as it seeks to demonstrate that re-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, and this is demonstrated by the fact that the pedagogical approach for activities based on the resource will always be changed. Most teachers want to adapt teaching materials to their styles and beliefs as to what is effective and OERs by definition allow repurposing and

adaptation in a way that many other ‘ready-made’ materials do not. Further research into the frequent types of changes that are made to OERs for language teaching is needed to study the relationship between teachers’ beliefs and their use and reuse of OERs more closely and the impact this may have on language learning.

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