The Importance of Open Educational Resources in the Teaching and Learning of Languages: Case study

Dr. Karen Ferreira-Meyers,
Institute of Distance Education, University of Swaziland
E-mail: karenferreirameyers@gmail.com

Introduction

In 1992, the World Wide Web was launched and soon after open information resources became freely available. In 2002 during a UNESCO forum on the use of digitised materials and tools for global education, the term Open Educational Resource (OER) was coined to talk about knowledge construction as an ongoing process which requires dynamic pedagogical materials. However, many of the materials available in the 1990s neither promoted enhanced learning nor incorporated the latest technological and pedagogical advances. And thus, the educational impact expected from these OER was minimal mainly because of lack of quality assurance for the content and information overload.

Teaching and learning of languages occurs on a daily basis. In 2007, Hewlett started being involved in a language learning project called Chengo—Chinese English on the Go and funded a version for Spanish speakers. At that point in time, the Foundation also intended to develop an open language platform and a half dozen or more open, free English teaching programmes for other languages. However, a decade later, in 2017, little is visible of these funded, proposed or intended OER development and implementation projects.

In many countries, (open educational) resources are unavailable or insufficiently geared towards the local contexts of the teachers and learners. This is, in particular, the case in many African countries, as was noted in the regional study entitled Curriculum, Contextualisation and French Language Teacher Training (Curriculum, Contextualization plurilingue et formation des enseignants, CCPFE in short).

Between 2013 and 2017, a regional research programme, funded by the Agence Universitaire de la Francophonie, was carried out to collect data relevant to the training of French-language teachers in the Southern Africa and Indian Ocean zone with a view to formulating recommendations for improving the content of training. The results of this study, mainly undertaken in South Africa, Madagascar, Seychelles, Comoros and Mauritius, show significant shortcomings in initial and continuing training in understanding and applying the concept of plurilingualism (the capacity of an individual to use several languages/linguistic varieties) and pluriculturalism (the notion that implies that an individual identifies with some of the values, beliefs and practices of the individual. The programme resulted in the publication of a training unit, both in print and online, focusing on basic theoretical principles and concepts as well as school curricula and training activities around plurilingualism.

In order to remedy the situation of limited resources, Open Educational Resources in the form of training modules and websites (among other modes) offer a welcome solution. In short, there is consensus today that Open Educational Resources or OER are teaching, learning and research resources that reside in the public domain or have been released under an intellectual property license that permits their free use or re-purposing by others. These OER include full courses, course materials, modules, textbooks, streaming videos, tests, software, and any other tools, materials, or techniques used to support access to knowledge.

Access to open education, open content and open educational resources (OER) is gaining more and more attention worldwide. With regard to language teaching and learning, LORO, the Languages Open Resources Online repository for language teachers (www.loro.open.ac.uk) is a noteworthy development. 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. One of the features that differentiates LORO from many of the other OER repositories is that it is mainly aimed at teachers, rather than learners. Another important project is the TESSA (Teacher Education in Sub-Saharan Africa) project which was started in 2005 by the Open University of the UK and aimed to provide OER to support school-based teacher development and improve the quality of teaching in Sub-Saharan Africa as it was observed that many teachers on that continent were unqualified or underqualified (TESSA, 2012). TESSA's aim was to make available a bank of modular, flexible resources, originally written in English and later translated into Arabic, French and Kiswahili. Adapting OER to the cultural realities of the various partner countries and regions was seen as essential to ensure that the learning materials could support the authentic, situated experiences of the teachers. This type of process and adaptation to local contexts is what the CCPFE team wants to achieve in future with regard to multi- and plurilingualism.

While there are more MOOCs offered in various languages each year, OER on teaching in multilingual contexts are little or non-existent, even though it is generally accepted that language competencies and intercultural skills will more than ever be a part of the key qualifications needed to successfully work and live in the new global reality.

Having noted the lack of appropriate knowledge and training when it comes to multi- and plurlingualism, the members of the CCPFE research team found it necessary to design and implement a teacher training unit focusing on the evaluation of teacher/student knowledge and skills related to plurilingualism. This has led to the recent publication (December 2017) of a module entitled "Du multilinguisme au plurilinguisme: pistes méthodologiques pour l'enseignement/apprentissage du français" (From Multilingualism to Plurilingualism: Methodological Approaches for the Teaching and Learning of French). It is an integral part of a four-year research programme that has brought together teachers from the Southern Africa and Indian Ocean zone around a theme whose impact on the field is far from negligible for classroom practices and official examinations. Because of the intercultural aspects involved, it is education itself that is in question: civilisational values in contact, identity issues, interactions around human problems and development in all its facets.

One of the main recommendations from the CCPFE project is noted below, namely:

In order to ensure that learners come out of the educational system with multi- and plurilingual competence to better face the professional (and personal) world in which they interact, a modified pedagogical "approach" is necessary. It has to be combined with a shift in attitude that moves away from the ideal of the "native monolingual" speaker, upheld for decades in foreign language pedagogy and its corresponding endolingual competence as the ultimate aim. Language teaching pedagogy should, on the contrary, move towards a model of exolingual competence (that is, communication between first language speakers and foreign language speakers or among foreign language speakers only). Within this perspective, and in line with translingual and cultural competence cited above, meaning is never evident, static and shared, but shaped by the multicultural and linguistic makeup of the speakers, who rely heavily on negotiation and cooperation for meaning. In this regard, teachers need to encourage an attitude of cooperation between learners and encourage the use of more than one language to facilitate metalinguistic conceptualisation and the execution of communicative tasks. (Ferreira-Meyers and Horne, 2017: 31)

Concretely and pragmatically, the assistance to be provided to teachers in their daily activities has emerged throughout this research as the main preoccupation to be taken into account in order to move forward. As the title indicates, this document is intended primarily for teachers and trainers concerned with the issue of languages-cultures in contact in educational and school situations, particularly through the teaching/learning of French in a multilingual context. However, the document does not have the intention to replace the establishment of the fundamentals through initial training designed and carried out in due form. The module, which is proprietary at the moment but will become an OER once it is sufficiently piloted and adjusted as per the pilot study participants, is intended as a modest contribution to a better

knowledge of the targeted problem. Surveys and experimentations were carried out in the secondary schools of the countries mentioned above, precisely in literary final year classes or equivalent.

The objectives of the module are to:

- promote the plurilingual and multicultural anchoring of apprenticeships among students who will join the world of work after obtaining a baccalaureate (or equivalent diploma) or who will be future students entering the first year of university;
- help overcome tensions between languages in a context of very restrictive globalisation, whether they are the languages that are under-represented in school curricula or the dominant languages;
- foster new attitudes towards languages and cultures in contact with each other in order to live together better within the respective communities, which are called upon to show solidarity in a world marked by the crisis of human and social values; and
- put in place a minimum set of tools for teachers and/or trainers in the face of new problems which require work to deepen or renew methods and approaches with a view to establishing a multilingual repertoire appropriate to the economic, political and socio-cultural context of the years 2010-2020.

The guide is structured around three complementary modules:

1. Clarifications are needed to understand the general framework of the treaty; they are included in the first module entitled "Plurilingualism and plurilingual contextualisation", written by Karen Ferreira-Meyers, University of Johannesburg, Fiona Horne, University of Witwatersrand (South Africa) and Cynthia Ornella Parfait, Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences, University of North Antsiranana.
2. The very notion of the school curriculum is then approached in order to get into what

constitutes the particular field of training, with regard to languages, particularly French. Emphasis is placed on the plurality of readings given the complexity of such a document. (Module 2 produced by Vina Ballgobin of the University of Mauritius, Aboudou Ahamada, IFERE of the Comoros and Velomihanta Ranaivo of the École Normale Supérieure d' Antananarivo, Madagascar.

3. The question of formative evaluation concludes the course (Module 3, written by Velomihanta Ranaivo, Annie Laurette of the University of Seychelles and Geneviève André, Seychelles Institute of Education). Emphasis is placed on writing, which constitutes one of the commonalities of the official examinations at the level of the education systems envisaged: the Literary Terminal and its equivalents, which does not downplay the importance of oral language. A choice had to be made.

Structuring is necessary for the understanding of the document, however, it is always possible to adopt a flexible itinerary that respects personal priorities. This is also what obtains in the accompanying website (in beta version, but available online in 2018 for all the members and the participating institutions of the CCPFE project; it will become an OER towards the end of 2018).

For consistency, each chapter in the module includes the same components, namely:

- Initial diagnosis and/or awareness raising which may take the form of questions and different activities, as appropriate;
- Brief notional, theoretical and/or methodological reference points, given the heterogeneity of the language teacher's upstream training at the secondary school, as observed during surveys and experiments in 2015 and 2017.
- Answers and/or clarifications on diagnosis/awareness and other actions taken in the field of education and awareness.

This short, descriptive analysis of the CCPFE programme and its outcomes (a module and a website which will be offered as OER in the near future) shows the importance of regional cooperation in the design and provision of OER for language teaching and learning. For now, the module and website exist in French only, but in 2018 further collaborative work will allow the publication of an English and Malagasy version first, and then possible versions in Southern African languages such as isiZulu, siSwati, languages spoken and written in Mauritius, Arabic, etc. The lack of OER in and about African languages is glaring as has been stated above. A rare example of a large-scale OER on/about an African language is Yorùbá Yé Mi, an online Yoruba course prepared by Fehintola Mosadomi, who is a professor at the University of Texas at Austin. The course is produced by the Center of Open Educational Resources and Language Learning (COERLL) and has one main component, namely a printed textbook of activities for the classroom that carries a Creative Commons 3.0 licence (i.e., CC-BY-NC-ND, which is to say "attribution, non-commercial, no derivatives"), that can be downloaded freely from the web.

The described case study on plurilingualism also underlines the importance of the two major themes of OER, namely sharing and re-use. 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. Lane and McAndrew argue that OER make it easier for teachers to find other teachers' resources and that this can inform their own practice, even though Conole (2010) underlined a gap between the availability of technology and resources, and the practical uptake by teachers. It is useful to analyse what makes learning with an OER in an interactive collaborative environment different from learning with textbooks in the traditional classroom setting. In 2014, Dixon and Hondo noted the following differences:

a shift from private to more public discourse spaces; learning for meaningful and content-oriented communication rather than for passing unit exams; new approaches for providing community-based feedback that could afford greater self-reflection and self-correction; progression from a teacher-centered classroom to a community-centered one; more frequent exposure to both positive and negative evidences, which could eventually lead to constructing and reconstructing linguistic knowledge; more authentic learning of structures by introducing grammatical concepts as they are needed for communication (Dixon and Hondo, 2014: 118).

We must remain mindful, through the concepts of multi- and plurilingualism/culturalism, that, while great changes in language education are being effected in large part by technology, language emerges from within both social and cultural contexts (Kramsch, 2000).

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