Open Educational Resources in Language Teaching and Learning

Anna Comas-Quinn and Alannah Fitzgerald

Support Centre for Open Resources in Education (SCORE) at The Open University
The following case studies summarise the development and findings of two projects that have sought to harness openness for the benefit of teachers and learners in the area of language teaching in higher education. Both projects sought to introduce Open Educational Resources (OER) and Practices (OEP) by focusing on supporting and guiding teachers as they develop the necessary literacies and practices to capitalise on the affordances of new open tools and technologies.

The first case study on the LORO project focuses on the development of an open repository to make available language teaching OER and the subsequent engagement activities designed to embed its use at the Department of Languages, at the UK Open University. The impact of this project is measured through usage surveys, web analytics and qualitative data obtained through focus groups and narrative frames. These provide some evidence that LORO has had an impact on the skills and professional development of language teachers by facilitating exposure to different pedagogical approaches and by encouraging innovation and reflection on practice. This project joins other initiatives in the area of language teaching, such as Humbox, Community Café, Onstream and Favor, with their focus on developing teachers’ engagement with OER and OEP while strengthening communities to facilitate knowledge creation and sharing.

The second case study from the TOETOE project reports on issues related to using language corpora in light of new developments with open technologies and open practices. Corpus-based resources have been around since Tim Johns coined the term ‘data-driven learning’ (Johns, 1994) to refer to language learners engaging with large corpora to derive understanding of real-world language use in context. However, most language teachers have not yet started to use these kinds of resources in their own teaching and in the development of their own teaching and learning materials. This case study will point to open corpus-based projects such as FLAX, the Lextutor, WordandPhrase and AntConc, and the open practices they employ as a means of remedying the current deficit in training with corpus-based resources in mainstream language teaching, learning, training and materials development practices. An OER cascade for training English for Academic Purposes (EAP) teachers and students at Durham University English Language Centre in the use of open corpus-based tools and resources was carried out to determine user perceptions of the design of these resources for use in EAP teaching and learning. Reflections from developing learning support OER for these training sessions as well as observations from the workshops on open corpus-based resources for EAP will be presented, along with insights from student surveys and teacher interviews.

1 www.humbox.ac.uk/
2 http://www.llas.ac.uk/projects/6192
3 http://www.linksintolanguages.ac.uk/resources/2589
4 www.llas.ac.uk/favor
5 http://flax.nzdl.org/greenstone3/flax
6 http://www.lextutor.ca/
7 http://www.wordandphrase.info/
8 http://www.antlab.sci.waseda.ac.jp/software.html
Case study 1: the LORO project at The Open University
Anna Comas-Quinn, Department of Languages, The Open University

LORO\(^9\) was a project funded by JISC and The Open University, UK (OU), to create a repository where the online teaching materials used by tutors at the Department of Languages could be stored, managed and published openly. LORO enables knowledge sharing and facilitates use of OER among language teachers.

Online teaching materials had been made available to tutors previously through the VLE, but teachers only had access to the course they taught and could not easily see materials for other courses, levels or languages. With the creation of a repository where resources are stored openly, the 300+ teachers at the Department of Languages can view and download all materials used for teaching in this distance language-teaching department. Additionally, users can share their own resources with others, and the site can be used to showcase the high-quality work developed by the institution.

The initial phase of the project focused on creating the repository and populating it with the existing materials. Through an environmental scanning exercise conducted prior to implementation users’ expectations and training needs were assessed. An online questionnaire was sent to all 316 OU language teachers (response rate 41%). The survey was followed by focus groups (conducted online and recorded) involving 33 questionnaire respondents. More information on the design of LORO and the results of the survey has been published elsewhere (see Comas-Quinn et al., 2011).

The technical development of LORO was done by the School of Electronics and Computer Science at the University of Southampton, using the open source repository software E-Prints and adapting the blueprint developed for the LanguageBox\(^10\) (Borthwick et al., 2009).

Between September 2009 and February 2010 over 700 resources (equivalent to around 300 hours’ worth of teaching resources) were uploaded by The Open University for French, German, Spanish, Chinese, Italian, Welsh and English for academic purposes. The resources were labelled, described and tagged. They were also organised in collections corresponding to the OU language courses, so that navigating the site was as easy as possible for users. Although most of the resources uploaded were for online language teaching, many could be easily adapted to face-to-face teaching and have since been reformatted as presentations to facilitate reuse in other contexts. This initial seeding of the repository created a critical mass of content that made it immediately useful to teachers at the OU and beyond.

In a second phase, tutors have been encouraged to contribute the materials they are creating themselves, which they do under their own name using individual accounts. Uploading materials to LORO is not compulsory and there is no financial incentive for sharing resources. Still, a small core of users have become active contributors, while the large majority use the content available but do not contribute their own. Training sessions were provided on uploading resources, copyright, correct attribution, tagging, etc. and the benefits of building an online profile and showcasing one’s work. Although the number of teachers taking an interest in LORO was considerable, only a few took the time to upload and share their own resources, citing time as the main barrier to further involvement.

Quantitative data have been collected to assess the extent to which LORO has become part of language teachers’ professional practice at the OU. A two-question poll was sent electronically to all 300+ teachers in the spring of 2010 (responses n=173), 2011 (n=161) and 2012 (n=79). The bar chart below shows that over three-quarters of respondents use LORO to browse or download materials for the courses they teach and around a third do so for courses other than those they teach.

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\(^9\)http://loro.open.ac.uk/
\(^10\)http://languagebox.ac.uk/
Further quantitative data obtained through Google Analytics and an inbuilt statistical package for the repository show that as well as being widely used within the institution by the 300+ teachers of the Department of Languages, LORO has had (since March 2010) over 1.5 million page views, with just under 1,000 visits a month from over 100 countries. There are currently over 1,200 registered users who have uploaded in excess of 2,500 resources. More impressively, LORO resources have been downloaded over 50,000 times in the last year\textsuperscript{11} alone.

Qualitative data were also obtained through focus groups and narrative frames (Barkhuizen and Wette, 2008) in March 2011 (n=12) and through focus groups in November 2011 (n=8) and March 2012 (n=8). The focus groups were conducted online through an audio-conferencing system widely used at The Open University, and were recorded and transcribed.

The main ways in which teachers reported using LORO were:
- to find resources for their teaching;
- to find inspiration and ideas;
- to standardise their practice and ensure comparability of the student experience.

The perceived benefits of using LORO were:
- increase in confidence in one’s practice;
- freeing up time to focus on and develop other aspects of one’s practice, such as asynchronous teaching or the integration of culture in language teaching;
- the value of receiving feedback from colleagues on one’s resources;
- the increased quality of the teaching materials, as teachers would prepare and choose their best work for sharing.

A further development in the LORO project has been the shift in focus from open resources to open practices. Openness, sharing, transparency, discussion, etc. are the long-term benefits of OER and OEP, and have been introduced through staff development sessions aimed at helping teachers engage with these concepts. In order to encourage more language teachers to familiarise themselves with OER and OEP, the current approach is to embed these into other professional development activities. Two projects started in 2011, one on collaborative writing and peer review, and another one, Performing Languages\textsuperscript{12}, on the use of drama techniques for language teaching, included substantial input on creating, adapting and reusing OER, and required participants to share the material they produced as OER for the benefit of the entire teaching community.

Some factors that have contributed to the success of the project are:

\begin{enumerate}
\item Timing in the introduction of LORO. This was arranged to coincide with a change of teaching platform (and a consequent reissuing of teaching materials in a different format) and it made the use of LORO almost\end{enumerate}

\textsuperscript{11} LORO has had over 50,000 downloads in the period July 2011 to June 2012.

\textsuperscript{12} http://www.performinglanguages.eu/
unavoidable for teachers in the department. The new materials were placed in LORO and a link to it was added to the teacher area of each course website. Even if use of LORO was not sustained beyond that initial point, it meant that all teachers in the department had become acquainted with LORO and could go back to it at a later stage.

2. Early and sustained user involvement in the project. A number of language teachers from the institution were employed to carry out project tasks as research assistants, project assistants, technical testers, resource ‘uploaders’, trainers and champions, and several went on to disseminate LORO at internal and external events.

3. Ongoing guidance and support for users. Although there is no obligation to create and upload resources to LORO, those with an interest in sharing their work are supported and encouraged through training sessions, presentations and workshops, a dedicated support mailbox, regular newsletters\(^\text{13}\) and a blog\(^\text{14}\). Increasingly, more staff development activities will include OER creation and the fostering of OEP as part of their outcomes.

Although its function was closely linked to the efficient delivery of resources to all stakeholders, the implementation of LORO has also had an impact on the skills and professional development of language teachers at the institution, and in spite of being primarily aimed at language teaching professionals, it is benefiting language learners indirectly through the enhancement in the quality and variety of resources used by language teachers in their practice. It is for this reason that in 2011 the LORO project was Highly Commended in the Learning Contexts category of the OPAL awards\(^\text{15}\) for Quality and Innovation through Open Educational Practices.

There is no doubt that LORO has stimulated a change in the practice of language teachers in this distance learning context where opportunities to discuss their teaching practice with colleagues are limited. Exposure to the different pedagogies embodied in the open resources available in LORO is already prompting experimentation, collaboration and discussion. Pedagogical reflection and innovation is being promoted as teachers become aware of the practice of colleagues and are able to try out different resources and approaches.

### Learning from OER: the LORO project

A number of conclusions or lessons learnt, organised around five main areas, can be extracted from the LORO project experience.

1. **The importance of discipline**

A discipline-based approach to OER seems most effective in meeting the requirements of users, who might be seen as a ready-made community with common interests, expectations and needs. The more homogeneous the community of users, the more useful and successful is the sharing of resources, as is the case for school teachers, for example (see the Guardian’s Teacher Network\(^\text{16}\) or mfltwitterati\(^\text{17}\) for Modern Foreign Languages specifically). Through meeting the specific needs of a group of language teachers in a particular context (language teaching at a distance), LORO has ensured its viability within the institution, and allowed the wider language teaching and learning community to benefit from it.

2. **Communicate, encourage, nurture**

It is necessary to engage the community to enable them to share (Windle et al., 2010). A championing role is therefore essential to the long-term sustainability of an initiative such as LORO. Constant communication, encouragement and training for active users and those who show an interest helps grow the core group of

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\(^{13}\) [http://loro.open.ac.uk/2939/](http://loro.open.ac.uk/2939/)

\(^{14}\) [http://www.open.ac.uk/blogs/LORO/](http://www.open.ac.uk/blogs/LORO/)

\(^{15}\) [http://www.oer-quality.org/the-loro-project/](http://www.oer-quality.org/the-loro-project/)

\(^{16}\) [http://teachers.guardian.co.uk/](http://teachers.guardian.co.uk/)

\(^{17}\) [http://mfltwitterati.wikispaces.com/](http://mfltwitterati.wikispaces.com/)
contributors and might in due time encourage content consumers to become more active in the community. Although research on online communities suggests that the majority will remain passive users while a small minority contributes most of the content (see Jakob Nielsen’s participation inequality\(^\text{18}\) and the 90-9-1 rule), the aim of a project such as LORO is to ensure that the community nurtures and grows the number of members of that core group of producers to make sharing richer and more effective.

3. Tracking reuse

White and Manton (2011) state that “the majority of reuse takes place in contexts that are not publicly visible” (p. 5). In the LORO context reuse has been the norm as the institution has always provided a basic set of teaching materials for teachers to adapt and reuse as needed. Finding evidence of reuse is harder as very few teachers share back their versions of the material (see http://loro.open.ac.uk/2769/ as an example of adapting and sharing back as OER). Even when they do, it is not necessarily through LORO that teachers share, but often through closed channels such as email or the teacher forum in the course website (a positive step towards increased sharing, nevertheless).

4. Reaching beyond ‘the converted’

In order to reach out to those who do not have an initial interest in OER and OEP, open resources and practices should become part of other projects and activities. Fostering understanding of open practices and open resources needs to become part of teachers’ regular professional development activities, as White and Manton state in recommendation 8 of their impact study: “Capitalise on existing professional development activities in order to foster a voluntary culture of sharing and reuse” (2011, p. 27). This has to include working with trainers and those responsible for CPD in institutions, as well as embedding these concepts in teacher education at all levels.

5. User engagement and transformative power

The experiential approach used in SCORE’s short-term fellowship programme\(^\text{19}\) is ideal to involve and empower users, as is the co-opting of users in the development and implementation of a project such as LORO. A transmission of knowledge model of training focusing solely on skills and/or content is not sufficient. Training models need to allow teachers space for reflection to work through the implications of open practices for their work, their identity as teachers and their role in relation to learners.

Future directions

To fully embed openness into teaching practice, more work is needed with trainers and those responsible for professional development at the institution to ensure that open practices are included not just as part of LORO-focused training or discussion, but also in relation to other areas such as the production and delivery of courses.

Two cascade projects are now underway to replicate the LORO knowledge-sharing experience for other disciplines within the University. In the first one, teaching staff in a particular faculty are being tasked with developing materials for online teaching and a repository based on LORO is being provided from the outset so that this community of teachers can share their work and support each other through the process. For the second one, a repository is being created to host a large collection of existing materials that teachers in a particularly large-population course have already been sharing through the course forum and a materials wiki. The personal accounts and the preview and searching facilities of the repository are considered an enhancement to current sharing arrangements. Both of these projects are starting with closed repositories (available only to teachers at the institution), but with a view to opening them up if the initiative proves successful. The provision of information and training related to OER and OEP from the outset is therefore essential.

\(^{18}\) http://www.useit.com/alertbox/participation_inequality.html

\(^{19}\) http://www8.open.ac.uk/score/score-oer-residential-course
Case study 2: the TOETOE project at Durham University
Alannah Fitzgerald, Durham University English Language Centre / SCORE at the Open University

The TOETOE project (ˈtɔɪtɔɪ: Technology for Open English – Toying with Open E-resources) was funded by the Higher Education Funding Council of England (HEFCE) and based at Durham University English Language Centre (DUELC) in collaboration with the Support Centre for Open Resources in Education (SCORE) at the Open University. TOETOE looks at the reuse and repurposing of English language research corpora and the linguistic enhancement of English-medium OER to make it more accessible to non-native speakers of English and to make more high quality teaching and learning resources openly available in English language education. For further background on what corpora are and how English-medium OER can be linguistically enhanced for language teaching and learning purposes, please refer to the following two case studies from the TOETOE project in this OER series from the Higher Education Academy (HEA) and the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC):

Openness in English for Academic Purposes. (Durham University ELC and the Support Centre for Open Resources in Education at the Open University)
TOETOE International: FLAX Weaving with Oxford Open Educational Resources. (The University of Oxford IT Services)

Along with exploring relevant open English language projects, another key focus of the TOETOE project is the collaboration with and promotion of the FLAX (Flexible Language Acquisition) project collections based at the University of Waikato in New Zealand. These collections feature open source software text analysis tools that effectively combine both open and proprietary English language content from a range of authentic contexts for English language learning and teaching. FLAX is built on multilingual digital library software by Greenstone20, with the potential to build open language collections in any modern language being part of the joint Greenstone and FLAX project vision. The FLAX project’s open model for releasing high-quality English language resources opens up new and flexible pathways for English language teaching practitioners, materials developers, publishers and researchers to consider. FLAX demonstrates how open resources in English language education can be based on the most valuable and relevant linguistic content while drawing on the most up-to-date research from applied corpus linguistics and data-driven learning (DDL). For further information on the development of the FLAX language collections and tools, please see Wu, Franken and Witten (2009), (2010) and Wu, Witten and Franken (2010).

Different stakeholder groups based primarily in the UK were identified to assess their interest in corpus-based OER for EAP as part of the TOETOE project, including: EAP teachers and students at DUELC; BALEAP21 (the Global Forum for EAP practitioners, formally the British Association for Lecturers in English for Academic Purposes); open education practitioners looking to incorporate corpus-based OER into their courses; corpus linguists interested in pedagogical applications for open corpora; and learning technologists. A range of workshop training and conference paper and presentation material targeted at the different stakeholder groups was produced as part of this project. Please refer to the SCORE case study22 for details on the TOETOE project dissemination and to the resources section of the TOETOE project blog23.

OER for EAP cascade training

In addition to training resources development and dissemination activities at conferences and professional issues meetings with interested stakeholders, an OER cascade training and research project was carried out with EAP teachers and students at DUELC during the Michelmas (spring) term of 2012.

Experienced EAP practitioners at DUELC volunteered to engage in Open Educational Practices (OEP) for the design, development and delivery of innovative corpus-based OER for EAP. Resources from four openly available web-based

20 http://www.greenstone.org/
21 http://www.baleap.org.uk/home
22 SCORE case study http://tinyurl.com/bak3r4s
23 TOETOE project blog http://www.alannahfitzgerald.org
corpora projects were used in the OER cascade study at DUELC. As previously mentioned, these include resources from the FLAX, Lextutor, WordandPhrase and AntConc projects. For further details on this OER cascade project, please refer to the Openness and English for Academic Purposes case study, which provides detailed discussions on, and demonstrations for how the open corpus-based resources were used in EAP teacher and learner training.

Emphasis was also placed on directly involving those participating EAP teachers at DUELC with the project manager of TOETOE, Alannah Fitzgerald, via focus group meetings to discuss the design, development and delivery of the OER cascade training workshops, which were carried out in the computer labs at DUELC. In this way, useful decisions for design and development iterations were implemented. Learning support OER in open file format were developed collaboratively for teacher and learner training across two different EAP student cohorts (12 intermediate and 22 proficient users of English) for developing learner autonomy with open tools and resources to enhance student reading, writing and vocabulary acquisition in specific subject areas. The learning support OER for EAP used in the training workshops can be found online in the resources section of the TOETOE project blog.

Existing EAP resources

Within current EAP-published materials there is a dearth of resources that fall under the promotional banner of preparing learners for ‘academic writing’. This is problematic as ‘academic writing’ is marketed loosely to refer to those resources that will in many cases only prepare students for essayist-style writing, falling within the college composition tradition of teaching ‘academic writing’ to primarily undergraduate students in the liberal arts.

Furthermore, a large part of the ‘academic writing’ materials market has been matched to English language proficiency and university admissions tests such as the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) and the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL). At best learners will be able to compose a standard five-paragraph essay as part of the requirements for passing these standardised English language tests. There is currently a deficit in resources, however, that prepare learners for writing according to the different academic literacies of their specific disciplines in higher education, where longer complex texts are the norm and where empirical research and data are often required to be incorporated and written up as part of the research writing process. This has resulted in many language centres based in higher education institutions developing their own in-house materials. This practice should be further encouraged by way of sharing relevant EAP materials across the community of practice.

EAP teacher training

Most English language educators, whether they are teaching in face-2-face, online or blended mode, receive no formal training in the use of corpus-based resources, either for language analysis or for the creation of language learning support resources in their teaching. In turn, this creates negative transfer whereby corpus-based resources are being under-exploited by learners of English. This is despite the plethora of published research, and to a lesser extent teaching resources, dedicated to DDL. Research articles, chapters and the few teaching resources available on DDL are often restricted to and embedded within subscription-only journals or pricey academic monographs. For example, Berglund-Prytz’s ‘Text Analysis by Computer: Using Free Online Resources to Explore Academic Writing’ (Berglund-Prytz, 2009), is an accessibly written resource for where to get started with OER for EAP but ironically the journal it is published in, Writing and Pedagogy, is not open access nor is it widely subscribed to by university libraries.

Problems with accessing and successfully implementing corpus-based resources into language teaching and learning scenarios have been numerous. Until recently, most of the text analysis or concordancing tools referred to in the research have been subscription-based proprietary resources (for example, the WordSmith Tools24), most of which have been designed for at least the intermediate-level user in mind. These text analysis tools can easily overwhelm language teaching practitioners and their students with the complex processing of raw corpus data presented via complex interfaces with too many options for refinement. There is a noticeable gap also with the absence of practical guidelines in resources development for EAP, including knowledge and guidance on licensing and the use of third-party content so that resources can be effectively shared across the EAP community of practice.

24 http://www.lexically.net/wordsmith/
Corpus-based OER for EAP

To begin to make up for the deficit in corpus-based resources for use in EAP across higher education contexts, further resources were sought to incorporate within the open FLAX project. Based on FLAX’s earlier work in effectively linking the BNC with open content from Wikimedia and to the live Web, a further request was made to the Oxford Text Archive\(^{25}\) at the University of Oxford IT Services for permission to produce open source tools for opening up the British Academic Written English (BAWE) corpus\(^{26}\) of university student writing to be presented as four discipline-specific collections in FLAX. It was determined that student texts from the BAWE would serve as an achievable model for academic writing for EAP students, and that this corpus of student texts would serve as a starting point if linked to wider resources, namely the BNC and Wikimedia resources (Wikipedia and Wiktionary), thereby providing a ‘bridge’ to more expert writing and to useful language support resources in EAP.

Useful outputs from the FLAX team to support the TOETOE project have been the BAWE collections in FLAX which are divided into EAP discipline-specific sub corpora (Physical Sciences\(^{27}\), Arts and Humanities\(^{28}\), Life Sciences\(^{29}\), and Social Sciences\(^{30}\)) for the search, identification, retrieval, usage and storage of key phrases as they occur within the texts. The language in the BAWE can also be compared with further usage in the BNC and Wikimedia corpora through the Learning Collocations\(^{31}\) collection in FLAX. For further discussion and training videos on the BAWE collections in FLAX, please take a look at the TOETOE International project case study with the University of Oxford. And, for further discussion and FLAX training videos on the importance of collocation learning resources in EAP, please read the other TOETOE case study with Durham University on openness and EAP.

Initial results from the OER for EAP cascade

Two cohorts of students participated in the OER for EAP training cascade sessions at DUELC along with EAP teachers who team-taught the sessions with the TOETOE project manager, Alannah Fitzgerald. The first group consisted of 12 students from a year-round pre-sessional course who were preparing to enter their destination postgraduate programmes at Durham University. These students have a high level of interaction with their teachers and we were able to tailor the OER cascade sessions to meet the specific needs of the students in this group. The second group registered for the OER cascade sessions through a university-wide sign-up system as part of the in-sessional courses on offer to provide support to those students already studying on degree programmes at Durham University. We were able to identify which departments the students were coming from in order to prepare resources that would be relevant to their specific subject areas. Both groups received a series of three to four hands-on workshops in computer labs that lasted between two and three hours.

In response to surveys on the usefulness of the OER cascade sessions at DUELC, the participating international students who took part in these sessions all viewed the joint teacher and student training workshops positively for the use and development of corpus-based OER for EAP. All of the respondents also stated that they had never heard of any of the resources and projects prior to having been introduced to them in the OER cascade sessions, further stating that they would continue to make use of them to support their coursework at Durham University.

To provide some evidence of the usefulness of these OER cascade-training sessions, a small controlled test using the Learning Collocations\(^{32}\) collection in FLAX was carried out with the year-round pre-sessional group. Students were assigned readings on the topic of the ‘ageing/aging population’ to prepare for a timed writing exam on the same topic. In demonstrating the Learning Collocations collection in FLAX using the search phrase, the ‘ageing/aging population’ (note American and British spelling variations – both are present in the corpora used in this collection), students were encouraged to search for and to store collocations related to this topic that could help them in their writing exam. Of

\(^{25}\) http://ota.ahds.ac.uk/
\(^{26}\) http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/al/research/collect/bawe/
\(^{27}\) http://flax.nzdl.org/greenstone3/flax?a=fp&sa=collAbout&c=BAWEPS&if=flax
\(^{28}\) http://flax.nzdl.org/greenstone3/flax?a=fp&sa=collAbout&c=BAWEP&if=flax
\(^{29}\) http://flax.nzdl.org/greenstone3/flax?a=fp&sa=collAbout&c=BAWEAH&if=flax
\(^{30}\) http://flax.nzdl.org/greenstone3/flax?a=fp&sa=collAbout&c=BAWESS&if=flax
\(^{31}\) http://flax.nzdl.org/greenstone3/flax?a=fp&sa=collAbout&c=BAWESS&if=flax
\(^{32}\) http://flax.nzdl.org/greenstone3/flax?a=fp&sa=collAbout&c=collocations&if=flax
the eight students who attended this OER training cascade session, four of the essays demonstrated greater flexibility on discussing the given topic of the ageing population. Thirteen students in total completed the exam, of which nine essays repeatedly showed the fixed expression 'the ageing population' throughout the papers with no variation. However, those four essays from participants in the OER training cascade session had managed to draw on collocations and related collocations from the BNC, Wikipedia and BAWE corpora in the FLAX Learning Collocations collection to achieve a more flexible use of collocations and derivatives for the terms ‘ageing/aging’ and ‘population’. Following the exam the eight students were asked if they had continued to prepare for their exam with the Learning Collocations collection in FLAX and four of them admitted to not having followed this new practice up in preparation for the exam. In light of how well their peers had done on the exam using the FLAX Learning Collocations collection to prepare, they said they be more inclined to use this corpus-based approach in future to support written assessments in their coursework.

There were also more instances of related terms and collocations being expressed in the composition of extended phrases on the topic of the ageing population, including the following examples: “as a shift in the distribution of population towards older age; rising longevity; the ageing population as a global phenomenon; people of working age” in one student text and, “this essay will discuss the features of ageing; the population in Britain is ageing and life expectancy is rising; ageing as a serious issue for modern society; life expectancies are on the rise; institutional care systems could be a funding problem of ageing in any society; the ageing problem” in another student text. Avoiding repetition has always been a stylistic preference in academic writing in English and this involves the flexible use of synonyms, collocations, derivatives and extended phrases as identified in these example student texts.

What is more, participating teachers and students of the OER cascade viewed the affordance of being able to search for related or relevant collocations in the Learning Collocations collection in FLAX, along with definitions of key terms and concepts in the wider context of the resources in this collection, as assisting with the brainstorming of a chosen topic area. This was viewed as an effective way of acquiring useful language for reading about and writing on a designated topic.

Many free corpus-based resources were explored in the OER cascade with teachers and students and are referred to more fully in the Openness in English for Academic Purposes case study also published by the HEA and the JISC in this OER series.

Learning from OER: the TOETOE project

A number of useful insights and lessons learned, organised around two main areas, have been identified from the TOETOE project at Durham University.

1. Openness and existing corpus-based resources

Findings from this case study show that there is a great need for creating exposure among the wider EAP community to the open corpus-based resources identified and used in this OER cascade project. Prior to this project at DUELC only one of the teachers involved in the OER cascade study had heard of the Lextutor. Most referred to prominent proprietary corpus-based projects and their corpus-derived resources which are available on the mainstream English teaching and learning resources market; for example, the Oxford Collocation Dictionary for Students of English CD-ROM from 2009, which is based on the BNC. The participating teachers viewed these off-the-shelf corpus-derived software resources as not being flexible and EAP-focused enough. Instead, as in the case of the Oxford Collocation Dictionary, they were viewed as offering very general or limited examples of actual usage for collocations, focusing more on definitions or collocations that were limited to very basic words like any and new.

Licensing restrictions were also raised whereby uses for such proprietary software are often limited to one computer installation only, resulting in frequent compatibility problems with subsequent versions of computer operating system software after the initial software installation. At the end of the OER cascade sessions, the open web-based corpus projects with training on how to implement their tools and resources in EAP teaching and learning were viewed by the participating teachers to be the more flexible and better sustained resources currently available; simply for the fact that the researchers behind these open projects are continually working on the research and development of their
projects and are engaged in useful feedback exchanges with users of their resources.

What is more, those open projects that are engaging with language teaching and research practitioners through social media for the discussion, feedback and development of open corpus-based resources (for example, Tom Cobb’s Facebook Lextutor group, Laurence Anthony’s AntConc Google group) are also offering new stimulus through Open Educational Resources and Practices in language education. In interviews with the EAP teachers shortly after the OER cascade study, it was believed that by encouraging teachers to engage with Open Educational Resources and Practices, that this would in turn lead to ‘ownership’ of the OER by the teachers for further re-use and re-purposing to be fed into design iterations of the training support OER used in this study.

2. Learning support OER for using open corpus-based resources

In many ways the reality of a rapidly expanding global higher education industry, with some of the greatest changes now taking effect in open and informal education online, has yet to trickle down into the workflow of English language teaching practitioners working in traditional education. Realising the need for more flexible and open resources in EAP that include practices for sharing that go beyond local educational contexts is one of the goals of the TOETOE project. Open educational practices that disseminate valuable learning and teaching resources and insights from the EAP community are to be encouraged as a means for tapping into and sharing our greatest resource, that of the EAP community itself.

Through the TOETOE project, it is hoped that EAP practitioners and their students will be able to benefit from insights into the open corpus-based resources for EAP presented in this case study based at DUELC along with the other two case studies on the TOETOE project with the HEA and the JISC. Typical issues with the uptake of corpus-based resources remain, however, and the findings from the OER cascade at DUELC confirm the need for additional learning support for those novice corpus users entering the corpus project websites for the first time. It goes without saying that some language teaching and research practitioners will take time to play with and explore the resources and this is evidenced in the AntConc Google and Lextutor Facebook discussion groups. However, many teachers still do not know about these open corpus-based projects and even for those that do we are not aware of exactly how they are employing the resources in their teaching practice. OER can be a means for sharing what practitioners do with these corpus project resources so that the wider language teaching and research communities can benefit from their applications and reflections into what does an approach work and what does it not work.

New directions

In collaboration with the University of Oxford IT Services and FLAX, TOETOE has now gone international as part of the OER International programme with the HEA and the JISC. There has resulted in an additional period of focused development of the FLAX open source software tools for further opening up the British National Corpus and the British Academic Written English corpus, both managed by Oxford. New interactive resources based on these leading corpora for uses in general ELT and EAP have been developed in response to feedback from international stakeholders working in OER and ELT from eight different countries. In addition to this, Creative Commons-licensed podcasts from the OpenSpires and Great Writers Inspire projects at Oxford have been promoted by the TOETOE and FLAX projects, for their re-use internationally in the development of podcast corpora for EAP. By linguistically enhancing podcast resources, which are now more readily available through web channels such as iTunesU and YouTube, there can now be an even greater alignment of text and audio-visual media for use in both classroom teaching and in informal and open online learning for EAP. The open agenda will continue for effectively linking open high quality content with existing proprietary corpus-based resources to provide even richer EAP resources for teachers and learners in different educational contexts around the world.

33 https://groups.google.com/forum/?fromgroups#!forum/antconc
34 http://openspires.oucs.ox.ac.uk/
35 http://openspires.oucs.ox.ac.uk/greatwriters/
Conclusion

These two case studies have highlighted the importance of engaging teachers in the developing, sharing and reuse of OER. Empowering users through early involvement in projects that deal with OER, whether through a design-based approach (as in TOETOE) or by employing them to assist with project tasks (as in LORO), is an effective way of allowing them time to begin to reconstruct their identity as teaching practitioners. The journey from acquiring new knowledge and skills to fully understanding the transformation that results from applying these to one’s practice can be a lengthy one, as the learning curve for many practitioners is rather steep. Early input through teacher education and sustained engagement and support for practising teachers through the incorporation of open practices into professional development activities are key. Embracing openness requires increased self-confidence, trust and generosity, and the mastery of multiple digital literacies, none of which can be achieved quickly or through one-off interventions.

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