



Open educational resources in the United States: Insights from university foreign language directors



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ABSTRACT

This study reports the results of a survey completed by 155 university foreign language (FL) directors in the United States (US) during Fall 2012. Survey respondents come from a variety of institutions and direct a range of FL programs. The objectives of the study are to (a) determine what FL directors know about open educational resources (OER), (b) understand respondents' perceived benefits and challenges of using OER, and (c) determine what resources and support are critical to establish or expand the use of OER in FL courses in the US. Results indicate that while 66% of FL directors do not recognize the term OER, many are in fact utilizing them. Those who incorporate OER in their FL courses state they do so to go beyond what is offered in traditional, print-based textbooks suggesting that OER represent more authentic and relevant content. While few (26%) respondents indicate intellectual property concerns, many note challenges such as finding OER at the appropriate level for students, time involved in creating and using OER, and training others (e.g., teaching assistants) how to use technology-oriented OER. The paper concludes by highlighting additional training and resources to more completely and successfully incorporate OER into FL curricula.

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1. Introduction

First proposed during UNESCO's *Forum on the Impact of Open Courseware for Higher Education in Developing Countries* held in Paris in 2002, open educational resources (OER) are defined as “digitised materials offered freely and openly for educators, students and self-learners to use and reuse for teaching, learning and research” ([Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2007](#), p. 10). More than ten years later, OER are only just beginning to affect foreign language (FL) teaching and learning at the university level in the United States (US). As a result of the increasing demand for FL courses and university budgets constrained by external economic factors, there are growing numbers of hybrid, blended, and fully online courses being offered in a variety of languages in the US ([Thoms, 2013](#)). As the interest in blended language learning and teaching and computer-mediated communication continues to grow ([Blake, 2013a, 2013b](#); [Chun, 2008](#); [Nicolson, Murphy, & Southgate, 2011](#); [Rubio, 2013](#); [Thorne, Fischer, & Lu, 2012](#); among many others), educators are still determining the best way to blend

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offline and online learning (Allen & Seaman, 2010; Blake, 2011; Blyth, 2013; Goertler, 2011), hence the increased relevance of OER. However, discussions of how OER can be best utilized in both traditional face-to-face and blended FL courses have not sufficiently addressed the issue of effectively mixing open and closed materials, tools, and practices (Blyth, 2013). These concerns, along with the complexity of accessing, evaluating, developing, and using OER (Iiyoshi & Kumar, 2008), can result in a complicated decision-making process for those in charge of FL learning and teaching contexts.

Foreign language directors in US universities are those faculty members given the responsibility of adopting FL textbooks, creating course syllabi, vetting the various technological tools used in the FL courses they supervise, among many other tasks. Foreign language directors therefore play a pivotal role in decisions related to curriculum, pedagogy, and technologies used in their programs (Levine, Melin, Crane, Chavez, & Lovik, 2008; Schulz, 2005). While adjunct professors and graduate teaching assistants (TAs) have some creative license when teaching their assigned courses, the FL director is ultimately responsible for determining what and how the content of their FL program will be uniformly taught, particularly in large, multi-section FL programs. As a result, university FL directors are at the forefront of dealing with the proliferation of OER in the US. However, attempts to understand what FL directors know about OER and how they make use of them in their programs have been very limited in scope (e.g., Henderson, 2011).

The successful incorporation—or lack thereof—of OER into post-secondary FL curricula is largely dependent on the extent to which FL directors embrace the concept and its related tools. Given the rapidly growing availability of OER on a global level, coupled with the increased number of hybrid, blended, and online FL courses being offered in the US, it is important to assess the current state of OER awareness and concerns among FL directors. Open educational resources will be part of the future of FL education, and steps should be taken to provide appropriate support and resources to ensure the field moves forward in a positive way for teachers and students. This study explores a number of issues related to the creation and implementation of OER in university FL programs, and the results shed light on how OER are conceptualized and integrated in courses by FL directors in the US context.

1.1. Affordances of OER

Given that the open movement in FL learning and teaching is still in its infancy (especially in the US), few empirical studies have been carried out that measure the effects of OER on second language learning and teaching. At the time of this study, only a handful of chapters and one edited volume have been published that specifically look at how OER might be conceptualized and used in a FL learning context (e.g., Beaven, Comas-Quinn, & Sawhill, 2013; Blyth, 2013; Rossomondo, 2013). That said, a number of overall benefits of OER use in education have been delineated.

Much of the literature on the affordances of OER to date has primarily focused on the cost savings that can benefit students, instructors, and institutions. Open educational resources are created with the intention to be freely shared with others giving students access to high quality materials and tools versus having to pay exorbitant fees to access similar content (e.g., textbooks or digital tools/applications) from traditional publisher venues. The average cost of textbooks and supplies in the US for the typical undergraduate student is now \$1200 (College Board, 2013), and there is evidence that OER can significantly reduce or eliminate textbook costs for students (Allen, 2013; Wiley & Green, 2012). While economics is an extremely compelling factor, and one that resonates particularly with students and administrators, it is not and should not be the only argument for increased use of OER.

In addition to the economic value, the increased availability of high quality learning materials via OER “can contribute to more productive students and educators” (Butcher, 2011, p. 13). A benefit for both students and instructors alike is the fact that OER are materials that are much more malleable than traditional, print-based materials produced by publishers. Specifically, the creators of OER often allow their work to be remixed and adapted by other instructors for their specific classroom context(s) via unique licensing alternatives (e.g., Creative Commons). As a result, OER do not—by their very nature—represent a cookie-cutter approach to teaching. In other words, instructors and their students can modify and improve upon existing OER and tailor the material or tool to their specific educational and contextual needs. This flexibility means that “instructors, students and self-learners who use OER can replace ‘flat’ educational experiences, where opportunity is a function of what one instructor or school can offer, with a constantly evolving multidimensional educational process” (Plotkin, 2010, Improving the quality of teaching and learning through resource sharing and collaboration section, para. 4). Preliminary data from the *Languages Open Resources Online* (LORO) project (Comas-Quinn, Beaven, Pleines, Pulker, & de los Arcos, 2012) suggests that OER positively impacts the skills and development of language teachers which we posit can, in turn, result in benefits for their students (Comas-Quinn & Fitzgerald, 2013).

Additionally, OER give instructors and students the ability to become producers rather than merely consumers of course content which can contribute to creating more effective learning environments (Butcher, 2011). Early data supports the idea that OER can provide a more student-centered experience, and these students, as a result of being more engaged and active contributors to the environment, will have a superior learning experience (Gruszczynska, 2012). While this evidence begins to demonstrate potential benefits of OER on student learning experiences, the reality is that non-traditional materials such as OER are a requirement to meet our current and future educational challenges both in the US and in many other parts of the world. The authors suggest that more research into the affordances of OER, while interesting in its own right, should not be a prerequisite for the forward progress of the movement. Open educational resources, while not published through more traditional, recognized models, have just as much (or, as some argue, more) to offer FL teachers and students in terms of getting the most out of their classroom experiences be they physical or virtual (Comas-Quinn & Fitzgerald, 2013).

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