The Role of Open Educational Resources in English Language Learning and Teaching

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the role of Open Educational Resources (OER) in foreign language learning and teaching, focusing on the field of ELT. Firstly, the concept of OER is introduced in the article by providing the definition of OER, role of OER in education, and studies on OER. Then the role of the OER in language learning and teaching is explained in accordance with language learning theories, and examples of OERs for the field of ELT are provided for learners and teachers of English. Possible concerns regarding the creation and use of OER by language teachers and learners are also examined in the article. The article ends with future directions and a summary of the benefits of using OER in language learning and teaching.

Keywords: English Language Teaching (ELT), Language Learning, Language Learning Theories, Open and Distance Education, Open Educational Resources (OER)

INTRODUCTION

Parallel to the developments in information and communication technology (ICT), e-learning is used in education to provide easy access to learning resources and hence giving learners equal opportunity for education. One way of using e-learning for this purpose is the creation and use of Open Educational Resources (OER). When the International Council for Open and Distance Education (ICDE) launched its Global Open Educational Resources Task Force in November 2006, it was stated that “One of the main driving forces for efficient and quality e-learning in the future is likely to be OER, which is tremendous opportunity for everyone to share, use, and reuse the world’s knowledge” (ICDE, 2006 cited in OECD, 2007).

The concept of OER was introduced to the field of open and distance education in the early 2000s, but it is only in recent years that it has been seen as a popular topic for research in the field of education as a whole. As for the field of English Language Teaching (ELT), there are insufficient number of informative studies or research regarding the use of the OER. Therefore, the aim of this article is to explore the role of OER in language learning and provide some resources that can be used in English language learning and teaching.

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BACKGROUND

Open Educational Resources (OER)

In 2001, The Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) announced the release of most of its courses on the Internet with free access. As a result of the increase in the number of institutions offering free or open courseware, UNESCO organized the 1st Global OER Forum in 2002. At this forum, the term Open Educational Resources (OER) was adopted.

There are many definitions of OER. UNESCO’s definition of OER is “open provision of educational resources, enabled by information and communication technologies, for consultation, use and adaptation by a community of users for non-commercial purposes” (UNESCO, 2002). Varis (2010) defines OER as “educational materials and resources offered freely and openly for anyone to use and under some licenses to re-mix, improve and redistribute” (Varis, 2010, p. 1076).

The distinction between an OER and any online resource is that OER are licensed for reusing (White & Menton, 2011). Creative Commons is the most commonly-known open license. The purpose for which learners are allowed to use the resources other than for sharing (e.g., altering the work or using the work for commercial purposes) changes depending on the type of the Creative Commons license (See www.creativecommons.org for detailed information).

Yuan et. al (2008) classifies OER into four categories: Large Institution-based OER initiatives; Community (or Consortium)-based OER initiatives; Specialized OER Initiatives; and Public OER Initiatives. Examples of each of the categories as taken from Yuan et al. (2008) can be found in the Appendix.

Role of OER in Education

One of the main roles of OER in education is that they serve the aim of education for all. According to Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, everyone has the right to education. OER help to give people access to information and to receive informal or non-formal education, or to support their formal education. More specifically, OER can be used by on-campus students and distance education students to support their courses as well as by non-formal language learners for self-study. They can also be used by teachers, online-tutors or academicians for teaching. Thanks to OER, all these learners or teachers can access a large variety of online resources.

Another important role of OER is that they are important for achieving the aim of lifelong learning. According to the European Commission, life-long learning is defined as, “All purposeful learning activity, undertaken on an ongoing basis with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competence.”(http://www.bologna-berlin2003.de/pdf/MemorandumEng.pdf). Life-long learners can use OER to access information whenever they want. In the future, many people will work in jobs that do not yet exist and many will need advanced linguistic, intercultural and entrepreneurial capacities and lifelong learning should be the norm. When OER include m-learning components, they allow ubiquitous learning (u-learning) to occur, i.e., learners can study anywhere and at any time. This makes u-learning easy for them, and hence facilitates life-long learning. In addition, teachers should review their needs and acquire new knowledge, skills and competence, including in languages (COM, 2008). From this view, teachers are also lifelong learners and can act as facilitators rather than conveyors of knowledge. OER give teachers opportunities for professional development by collaborating with other teachers who are teaching learners from different cultures.

In spite of all these positive aspects, there are some problems regarding the use of the OERs. Problems such as lack of Internet access or lack of financial resources to buy technological tools or software can prevent learners or teachers from using these resources. This means that even if OER are created for the
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