Chapter 4

Advantages and Challenges of Using OERs in Teaching Less Commonly Taught Languages: Case Study From Croatia

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ABSTRACT

This chapter attempts to draw conclusions about the extent and modality of corpora use in teaching less commonly taught languages, based on the teachers’ experience with their foreign language students, their use of corpora and corpus tools to prepare teaching materials, and based on their use of the corpora in the direct teaching process. The advantages and challenges of using OERs in teaching less commonly taught languages across different language learning levels discussed in this chapter are the result of detailed analysis of the preferences and needs of teachers at Croaticum (Centre for Croatian as a second and foreign language – CFL at the University of Zagreb), which is considered the largest and central institution for teaching CFL. The results are also based on the analysis of existing Croatian language corpora and the literature about these corpora.

INTRODUCTION

The incremental growth of open educational resources and the availability of technology in classrooms nowadays provides opportunities for language teachers and learners to access data and information that, until recently, was difficult or impossible to access and to enhance the quality of educational content. Nonetheless, the fact is that teaching practices and technology evolve at different pace.

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Computer corpora, if considered as a valuable open educational resource in language teaching, may have an important role in shifting teaching practices towards more innovative and student-centered teaching. The benefits of corpora as open educational resources for language teaching and learning have been investigated by many authors in recent years (Aston, 2001; Breyer, 2009; Conrad, 2000; Frankenberg-Garcia, 2014; Hunston, 2002; Liu & Jiang, 2009; O’Keeffe & Farr, 2003; Sinclair, 2004).

Today, it is obvious that computer corpora offer massive collections of the authentic language data that were previously unavailable and provide language teachers with the access to the wealth of information needed to fulfill the vocabulary, grammar and reading needs of foreign language students.

But, the majority of the literature related to the benefits of the use of corpora in foreign language teaching addresses the implementation of methodologies within English as a foreign language (EFL) classrooms.

However, with the development of corpora and other language resources and tools for less commonly taught languages (LCTLs), the need to address the role of teachers and their perception on the use of these resources in their foreign language class became apparent.

Although natural language processing research of the LCTLs and the creation of language resources that could be used for language teaching (e.g. online dictionaries, lemmatizers, part of speech taggers and corpora) has lately become increasingly intense, studies about advantages, challenges and teachers’ perceptions on the use of these resources in foreign language teaching of the LCTLs are still missing.

Consequently, there is a gap in the literature and a need for studies that explore the role of these resources and the attitudes of teachers towards using them in foreign language teaching of the less commonly taught languages.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND OF CORPORA AS OPEN EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES

Open Educational Resources (OERs) are defined as “any type of educational materials that are in the public domain or introduced with an open license. The nature of these open materials means that anyone can legally and freely copy, use, adapt and re-share them. OERs range from textbooks to curricula, syllabi, lecture notes, assignments, tests, projects, audio, video and animation” (UNESCO, 2012).

The research on open educational resources has already revealed that OERs have many pedagogical and learning impacts. OERs can improve both teaching and learning of different subjects, personalize the learning experiences and promote active teaching approaches, while significantly reducing the time for preparing the lectures (Bliss et al., 2013; Farrow et al., 2015; Pegrum, 2016; Wenk, 2010).

Since language resources (such as online dictionaries and corpora) are both open and free resources and proved to be useful for pedagogical means and the development of the language awareness (Beaven, 2013; Thomas & Evans, 2014), they could be implemented as OERs to improve language teaching and learning.

Open Educational Resources (OERs) for teaching English as a foreign language (e.g. computer corpora, spelling checkers, online dictionaries, corpus-based collocation dictionaries, lemmatizers and part-of-speech taggers) have already proved their applicability and usability in language teaching (Beaven, 2013; Pérez-Paredes, Ordoñana Guillamón & Jiménez, 2018; Thomas & Evans, 2014).