

Open Educational Resources for Teachers of Emergent Bilinguals
Emphasis on K-12 Teachers

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Abstract

Open Education Resources or OER are growing and seem to threaten one of education's most central and important industries: publishing. They affect how teachers work and how students learn, while reflecting the constraints of the financial and educational environment of today, particularly the common core curriculum and standards. Despite growth and development of OER, it has not developed as expected and there is little in the way of OER for Emergent Bilinguals. When OER is expanded to include Open Educational Practices or OEP, Emergent Bilinguals teachers and students seem to have more options.

Keywords: Open Educational Resources, Open Educational Practices, OEP, Emergent Bilinguals, Translingualism, ESL, ENL, Common Core, Engageny

Overview

Among the many 21st century education trends, one finds the advent and rapid growth of open source resources for teachers, known as Open Educational Resources or OERs. OERs have been 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” (UNESCO, 2015). They come from a variety of sources but are largely digital in origin and format, although some are made to be printed out for classroom use if preferred (Graves, 2016). They seek to either replace, or work in addition to textbooks. Many feel they should replace them, including former Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, who in 2012 stated “Within the next few years, textbooks should become obsolete” (Fitzgerald, 2012). This hasn’t happened. In fact, since that time textbooks have continued to increase in price at three times the rate of inflation, constituting a multibillion dollar industry, and one of the few remaining solidly profitable areas of publishing (Gale 2016), costing the average community college student as much as an additional semester of full-time tuition (Gale 2016). In K-12 Education, the costs are even larger, with 5.5 billion dollars a year (Lillejord & Ellis, 2014. p. 51). The reasons why the textbook industry remains not just viable but flourishing, are complicated. Many of them lie with the state of OER today.

Open Educational Resources

There are many forms of OER available from both public and private sources, from individual teachers offering lessons plans, to school networks endeavoring to increase their profile, to non-profits created with the specific goal of making textbooks obsolete. The amount of resources overwhelms their utility. There is an oversupply of content, but no easy way to get it to teachers, according to one expert in the field, Stanford Forte, of the California Open Source Textbook Project, who explained that “The marketing realities of distribution ... the resources and skills to do that don’t lie within the academic sector” (Fitzgerald, 2012). The lack of organization can be overwhelming, and may be especially so for K-12 teachers who may feel boxed in by common core requirements and standardized testing, and who can get lost sifting through an ocean of information, much of which is unlikely to meet curriculum

guidelines for their states and districts (McShane, 2017). A variety of actors have attempted to organize resources, curriculum, and even develop entire textbooks for free. Unfortunately, no clear compository of resources for Emergent Bilinguals has emerged. Much like a start-up company, Open Educational Resources hold promise but have not passed into an established phase of widespread utility (Stacey, 2013). So far, the effect of OER on classrooms has been entirely unstudied (Blyth, 2014).

The use of open educational resources or OER has generated substantial debate in the educational community. One debate centers on the use of fixed curriculum and textbooks. Some hold the traditional belief that “the most obvious and most common form of material support for language instruction comes through textbooks” (Brown and Lee, 2015), while others in OER eschew standardization and a reliance on written materials to focus on curriculum that privileges a variety of sources and activities (Blyth, 2014). From either viewpoint, the possibilities of OER can’t be ignored.

While OER focused for much of its first decade on reproducing and distributing sources that would be familiar to users of traditional course materials (Blyth & Dalola, 2016), it did not produce much in the way of textbooks or full curriculum for Emergent Bilinguals. A look at the six most prominent compendiums of OER, authenticcollaboration.org, oercommons.org, openstax.org, teachingcommons.us, FLAX, and Merlot, shows little for Emergent Bilinguals. Many of these sites grouped resources by subject, but none of them had a subject area related to either Bilingual Education, ESL, ENL, or TESOL. The few resources for emergent bilinguals working on English Language skills were geared towards the college level, with free textbooks available for business English and “Advanced” English. There were some short units and lesson plans geared towards k-12 education on oercommons.org with the tag “ESL.” Most of it, however was designed for English Language Arts classes and included content far from ideal for ELLs like Shakespeare’s sonnets. Merlot fared better but the quality of results was very low, based on their own review system, and included few academically produced resources. FLAX, whose organizer was formerly involved in language teaching, had some resources, but this library-like site, while providing some resources for self-directed ELL or for use in the classroom is fragmented and unfocused. None of these web-sites demonstrated an awareness of Emergent Bilinguals as an important group deserving of resources. If one

considers that the field is heavily weighted towards university level teaching, then it could be argued that Emergent Bilinguals of college age would be more likely to go to community colleges. However *The Community College Consortium of Open Resources* (at oerconsortium.org) has texts for learners of German and Spanish but none for English Language Learners.

With resources on a more granular level, the most popular website for individual teachers sharing lesson plans, sharemylesson.com, owned by the union organization the United Federation of Teachers, shows the best promise. It currently attracts over three million visits annually since its inception in 2012, and contains over 300,000 resources. It also provides a venue for non-profit organizations like the bilingual education group Colorin Colorado, to get their resources directly to teachers. This website provided far more resources than any other for Emergent Bilinguals, and also allowed filters by grade, by state-standards, and had a section for English Language Learners with a large amount of content. However, the amount compiled for Emergent Bilinguals was small compared to other sections across the different age groups. In the high school section for instance, English Language Learners had 425, with Spanish and German having well over a thousand pieces of content, and French having 2,388 items (Sharemylesson.com).

Although they are less likely to appear in top search engine results, the vast expanse of OER also extends to state-supported projects. As two of the states with the most emergent bilinguals, and in more pro-bilingual political environments, California and New York (Garcia, 2010, p. 13) would be expected to provide a good point of reference.

The main curriculum site for New York, engageny.org, demonstrates many of the drawbacks of public-private partnerships to create OER. Thirty-four million dollars were paid by New York state to four different vendors for the project (Cavanaugh, 2016). The initial proposal required that the vendors not commercialize their work, however no bids were received, and the proposal had to be re-written so that the vendors would own the work, restricting the open content to the engageny.org website. The difficult line between what is seen as derivative of this work was drawn in favor of the private companies (McShane, 2017).

With over 43 million downloads as of June 2016, EngageNY.org is well-perceived as the best open resource providing close alignment with the common core (Cavanaugh, 2017). However, the actual website falls short of providing substantial help to teachers, if alignment of standards is not seen as a primary purpose of teaching. In form,

the website is a product of the standardized testing system, providing lists of rules and standards by subject more often than functional content for classroom use. When it does provide more explicit lessons plans or materials, those materials are heavily influenced by the common core, such as in its preference for unit-plans that use excerpts of books instead of full texts. Too often, it is essentially the common core standards defined in detail.

The limited files available on the website for emergent bilinguals are much the same, and focus on the levels at which the ELL should be at and the steps within each level. The Common Core was not created with Emergent Bilinguals in mind, but treated them as an afterthought who might need extra time. This, combined with the scripting of the Common Core, in the words of Garcia and Kleyn, (2016)“leaves little space for integrating different elements of students' language and cultural practices to support content learning and language development." One file available for teachers of emergent bilinguals is even named “positioning emergent bilinguals in the core of the core” (engageny.org). It helps to align curriculum with common core standards, but its educational utility is more questionable. On the other hand, the adoption of common core standards across the country make OER like these far more likely to be appropriate outside of the state in which they originated, and easier for educators to find (McShane, 2017).

California had a different goal for its OER when setting up the California Open Textbook Project in 2002: to reduce the state’s \$400 million dollars worth of annual spending on textbooks by leveraging existing curriculum and its vast system of high-quality state universities. It never produced a single book and the website owner has suspended the account (Paul, 2012). It appears that it was merged with a similar program for college textbooks that has had greater success. Working with the Hewlett Foundation it now has over 120 free textbooks available for use through its website, cool4ed.org, which is a sub-organization of California’s multimedia open-source Merlot project. However, none of the resources are for Emergent Bilinguals, despite the fact that California has more than twice as many Emergent Bilinguals as any other state (Garcia & Kleifgen, 2010. p.13).

At the federal level, it was only at the end of 2015 that the department of education began the #goopen campaign which encouraged districts to create OER, and required any materials created with federal direct grants to be open-sourced. One would expect the billions of federal spending to lead to many open resources. However, the

past gives reason to be skeptical. In 2011 two billion dollars worth of federal trade adjustment funds were appropriated for community colleges to fund research and course development for low-skilled workers affected by closures as a result of NAFTA and similar global flows of human capital. All curriculum produced was specified to be open-sourced, but it failed to produce any content for emergent bilinguals (Stacey, 2013).

Some for-profit publishers are actually embracing open source textbooks . Rather than fight it, they see it as something they can control and attach their own proprietary add-ons to(Harris and Schneegurt, 2016). The publisher is able to make money on the back-end and increase brand awareness, but at the cost of the individual author, who would have created the work under the idea that they would be recognized and compensated (Fitzgerald, 2012). It was this economic model that finally brought the bidders out for New York’s resource website.

Individual authors have proven surprisingly still relevant with OER, despite expectations that textbooks might be composed, like wikipedia, by a community of many authors, building their work off of each other. Most of the highest rated free textbooks on MERLOT and openstax.org were written by a single author, either from an out-dated edition or paid for with grants (Harris and Schneegurt, 2016). However, the same people who author expensive textbooks for profit are in positions of power, which allows them to force their use. In my personal experience, the head of the language department at my high school also authored the textbooks we used in Latin classes. Even though the state of California has set up commissions and funded free open source textbook projects, the atmosphere remains such that one California State University math professor was reprimanded for using a free textbook in his course in place of the \$180 textbook authored by the department chair and co-chairperson (Harris and Schneegurt).

More studies are needed on OER. A search for “open educational resources” in three leading journals for bilingual education,¹ NABE Journal, Bilingual Research Journal, and Bilingual Review, turned up zero hits. The same for an EBSCO search of “Open Educational Resources” with the search terms “bilingual,” “ESL” or “TESOL.” When searching through google scholar, more sources came up, but nine out of ten of those focused on K-12 Education and Emergent Bilinguals were not from scholarly journals, and often simply pointed out the existence and potential of

¹ listed in the course syllabus

OER, or viewed it from the perspective of a technologist and not an educator. It could almost be said that there is no clear resource collection for an English Language teaching better than the humorously named and out-dated for profit site known to amateur ESL teachers around the world, daveseslcafe.com.

Fifteen years after UNESCO launched its first global conference on OER and sought to define the word, the resources have not integrated into something more functional. There is a mixture of private actors, non-profit foundations, and state supported resources, with little coordination or even organization between them, a field struggling to go from nascent ideas and start-ups to something with permanent funding that can permanently help more teachers (Stacey, 2013). There is a large gap in focus and usability between the “start-ups” funded by foundations and universities who provide MOOCS (Massive Open Online Courses) and adult resources, and the more classroom-focused curriculum developed or organized by state education departments. Were more research done in this area, perhaps better coordination would be found between the two poles, and the lack of OER for emergent bilinguals would change.

Open Educational Practices or OEP

When the concept of “open” theory is taken in a different direction, however, and the emphasis is placed on the relationship of resources rather than ownership and identification as an OER, technology emerges as a more encouraging tool in K-12 Education. This has been labeled as Open-Educational Practices or OEP. OEP have been defined as “practices which support the (re)use and production of OER through institutional policies, promote innovative pedagogical models, and respect and empower learners as co-producers on their lifelong learning path” (Ehlers). This can be traced in academic history beyond the advent of the internet to Open Pedagogy theories of the 1960s. These theories emphasized, in contrast to scripted or textbook-confined curriculum, that educators should seek to reassemble and rearrange content taken from the student’s community or environment, a sharing of resources through a network, with an emphasis on interactive choice on the part of the learner (Paquette, 1992).

If this route is seen as the most successful path forward for OER, it may partially explain why top-down, restrictive models of OER like Common Core curriculum and corporate publishers, have not been widely adopted,

and why they haven't been adopted or created by educators of Emergent Bilinguals. When a less restrictive definition of open resources is used -- for example, to include facebook or youtube, it may be more likely to be found useful by Emergent Bilinguals and Educators. Some believe the limitations of OER are not due to faults in the content or form of resources, but rather the lack of OEP in educators and decision makers (Ehlers, 2012), and their need to be both more trusting and willing to share resources, but also to embrace a system of learning that empowers individuals and sees learning as a continuum that extends throughout their lives instead of a fixed substance that emanates from the power structure.

Carl Blyth's and Amanda Dalola's "Translingualism as an Open Educational Language Practice: Raising Critical Language Awareness on Facebook"(2016) speaks of the utility of using facebook to encourage translanguaging, or the use of mixing two language so that a speaker is maximizing the use of their language knowledge. Their study showed that text-based class activities were measurably not as effective in encouraging translanguaging as creating a dialogue on facebook. Using the facebook page created for the textbook, students naturally began to translanguange, using the target language they hadn't felt comfortable with in class. They may have felt, as Blyth and Dalola theorized that they were "beyond the prescriptive reach of language educators and program administrators."

Conclusion

The vast resources of the internet may not be as neatly designed for learning as a textbook, but because they may be more deeply embedded in the life of the student, they may in the end be more effective to help language learners. Endorsers of Open Educational Practices, such as the use of facebook in the classroom, may stress that educators utilize OER but remind them that they are not static, and that educators need to examine, change and re-use resources as suits the purposes of their students (Funk & Mason, 2015, p. 287). OER developers should keep this in mind, should they hope to bridge the gap between information and practice. The best way to do that is by designing such resources so that they are easily integrated into students lives and the web, and in keeping with the traditional definition of OEP, interactive, democratic, and interlinked. There are many resources on the web not specifically

designed for educators, but rather with students in mind, and perhaps it is these open resources, from the popular language learning app *duolingo* to the ubiquitous facebook, that teachers may gather the most from by acting to connect students with language in the most natural of features of the 21st century, the internet itself.

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