

Employing OER to prepare teachers for multilingual classrooms: possible prospects and challenges

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Abstract

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The multilingual nature of classrooms across the globe is becoming the norm rather than the exception. Language in education, multilingualism in education and dealing with the associated challenges is still a source of concern for many departments of education. This is rightly so since language is at the core of education and research has linked academic achievement to proficiency (or lack of proficiency) in the language of teaching and learning. It is important to continue to research avenues of reducing the challenges of language in classrooms.

The broad aims of this study, which is still in the development stage, are to explore how the multiplicity of languages represented in classrooms can be used as an asset in teaching and learning. An aspect of this is to explore the different practical ways of supporting teachers in such situations. The participants are intermediate phase (Grade 4-7) teachers and learners from two schools located within remotes communities in South Africa; whose access to the internet might be limited or restricted. One of the sub-questions is: How can OER be used effectively to support teachers in multilingual classroom? We also intend to investigate the value of such support from the perspective of both the teachers and the learners involved. It is anticipated the project will commence in the first quarter of 2014. There has however been a review of literature on the use of OER as a resource for teachers in multilingual classrooms.

This paper is a description of the findings of the preliminary literature review. The study revealed that a lot of OER is available for teaching language, specific aspects of literacy, for development of academic writing skills and building vocabulary. There is however not a lot of materials in terms of support and resources for teachers in the multilingual context. It is anticipated that this paper will initiate a conversation regarding the needs of the teachers concerned. It is vital to for us to support teachers to employ the language resource in their classrooms to facilitate learning rather than viewing the languages as a barrier to learning. There is definitely a place for OER in the discourse and that position has to feature prominently because of the importance of language in education.

INTRODUCTION

Language is crucial to communication and education. The central role of language in the development of lower and higher order thinking skills and therefore learning cannot be overstated. Language is a key factor in learning on three levels: knowledge construction, reconstruction and reproduction (and/or application). At each of these levels, the pivotal role language plays cannot be taken for granted. In the classroom, for appropriate learning to take place, the learner has to be able to construct knowledge, and apply meaning to those concepts and units of learning he comes across. Post classroom encounter the learner must then reconstruct what he has come across, identifying main points, memorising and internalising them using various strategies to ensure adequate learning in preparation for assessment. The assessment then acts as the avenue for the reproduction and/or application of such knowledge (Omidire, 2009; Omidire, Bouwer & Jordan, 2011).

The success of the above statements applies to an ideal situation where learners in a classroom are competent users of the language of instruction at the cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) level. The reality however, is that learners' have only basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS) in the language of learning and teaching. The situation is then compounded by the fact that there is usually also a multiplicity of languages represented in such classrooms (Cummins & Swain, 1986; Cummins, 2000).

Multilingual classrooms are places where students of various linguistic and cultural backgrounds are studying together, where the language of instruction is an additional language and usually most of the learners are still learning it. The teachers and learners do not all share a common language or cultural background. Multilingual classrooms are no longer features of education in Africa alone, but have become commonplace in developed countries as well. Research has shown that marked disadvantages with regard to learning and assessment occur for children where the home language differs from the language of learning and teaching (Baker, 2001). Research has also shown that where two or more languages are present in the classroom the learners stand to benefit (Gracia in Datta 2001). It is therefore important to explore various ways in which the different languages represented in our classrooms can be used as assets and resources to facilitate learning.

The role language plays in the teaching and learning in multilingual contexts cannot be trivialised. So even if we have well-trained teacher, access to OER and the best instructional materials and resources, if the multiplicity of languages in the classroom is not taken into account the yield in terms of actual learning that takes place might still not be at the optimal level.

A fundamental way of facilitating learning in multilingual contexts is to support teachers who are in such situations to rise above the complexity of the circumstances and adopt strategies that enable learners maximise the opportunities to learn. The successful use of OER for supporting language teaching and specific aspects of literacy makes it strategic to attempt to use OER to turn the multiple languages into teaching and learning tools. It is against the background of exploring the practical usage of OER in multilingual contexts that a review of the scope of its use for language learning purposes was deemed necessary.

PROPOSED STUDY

The proposed study aims to explore way in which the multiplicity of languages represented in most African classrooms can be used as a resource for teaching and learning, how complex language situations can be seen as advantageous rather than barriers to learning and the impact of the language situation on the psychological well-being of the learners as well as the self-efficacy of the teachers. The participants are intermediate phase learners (grades 4 – 6), their teachers and parents. A sub-question in the study investigates the possible use of OER as training, teaching and learning resources for teacher and learners. Hence answering the question: How can OER be used to effectively support teachers in multilingual classrooms?

In the next sections, the meaning of and current scope of the uses of OER in terms of language, literacy and multilingual classrooms will be discussed.

UNDERSTANDING OPEN EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES (OER)

Less than two decades ago textbooks and hard copies of instructional materials were all that was available for teaching and learning. Indeed, there are many areas that still depend solely on paper-based learning materials. The internet has now provided a level playing field in terms of eliminating barriers created by unequal provision of educational resources ranging from the physical structures to basic learning materials. The internet has provided access to unlimited levels of information and resources at reduced costs while also providing opportunities for interaction and collaboration (Kurshan, 2006).

According to Atkins, Brown and Hammond (2007), open educational resources (OER) are resources available for teaching, learning and research. Their intellectual property licence allows for their free use and/or adaptation for use by others provided they are properly acknowledged. A key feature of the OER is that it offered freely and openly for all (Hilton III, Willey, Stein & Johnson, 2010). One of the goals of the initiative was to use information technology to remove barriers and facilitate equal access to educational opportunities by providing full courses, course materials, tests and other resources that support access to the knowledge required. Johnstone, (2006) and Hylan (2006) elaborate further by describing OER as tools and training materials for teachers and support materials for personal use as part of an online learning community.

EXPLORING THE FIELD

There are many websites that provide access and links to OER as resources for different subject areas. These sites include but are not limited to the following:

- OER Africa
- African Virtual University - AVU Open Education Resources (OER@AVU)
- Merlot
- Teacher Education in Sub-Saharan Africa (TESSA)
- Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT)
- Open Resources for English Language Teaching
- Open Learning Initiative
- Curriki
- UCLA Language materials project

The resources provided by these and other similar websites are of immense value and useful in the contexts for which they were designed. Those resources that deal specifically with language related matters focus on teaching aspects of language particularly English. These are directed at teaching English as a second language to immigrants. There are those like the Chinese and English on the Go (CHENGO) project, a collaboration between the Chinese and US governments, which uses online technology for teaching the languages (Smith, Wang and Casserly 2006). There's also TESSA who has provided resources in different languages such as Arabic, English, French and Kiswahili while some like the UCLA language materials project has resources for learning many African languages. However, multilingual classrooms require strategies that embrace the diversity represented in the classrooms. There is a need for a concerted effort for us to also think along the lines of the reality of pedagogy and curricula that recognise and utilise the two or more languages often represented and what to do concerning using the languages as assets.

Since a large percentage of the material available is dedicated to teaching and learning specific languages in particular English; supporting learners in a diverse and multilingual context is often viewed from the perspective of access to and support with learning English as second language alone. Materials therefore aim to facilitate the acquisition of the second language and probably rightly so since the learners targeted are, more often than not immigrants. The reality in Africa is that the official language and languages of teaching and learning are often foreign languages and this compounded by the fact that there many languages in the different countries. South Africa has 11 official languages, Nigeria's official main official language is English but there are as many as many as 400 languages and dialects in the country. Therefore, focusing on teaching in English and excluding the learners' home language does not appear to be working. A cursory look at the literacy statistics for African countries that are available show that we still have a long way to go in order to achieve basic literacy. Without learners being able to read and write in the language of instruction implies that we cannot then expect them to attain meaningful achievements in other subjects such as Science and Literature.

What is required is a paradigm shift, for those of us affected to begin to brainstorm on how the languages the learners bring to the classroom can be used to support their learning; on how teachers in such contexts where there is a multiplicity of languages present are equipped to support the learners using technology where available; and where the teachers are trained in strategies that build the learners' confidence and motivate them.

PROSPECTS OF USING OER TO SUPPORT TEACHERS IN MULTILINGUAL CONTEXTS

The use of OER provides endless possibilities and we have a duty to further extend the boundaries for the ultimate benefit of the learners as Smith *et al.* (2006) put it, we should “consider breaking down the constraints of our current education system”. We have to think of ways to breakdown the old barriers and utilise what was hitherto deemed a barrier, in this case language, as an asset and learning support tool. There has been considerable work done by the Human Language Technologies unit of the Meraka Institute, who are conducting research into speech and language technologies. They have developed text-to-speech technology, language identification, intonation and pronunciation modelling among others. Africa Virtual University has a series of OER for teacher education ranging from special needs to ICT. Some of the innovative methods used are listed below:

- Electronic flash cards
- Audio
- Video
- Sample lessons
- Translators
- Interpreters
- Focus on building vocabulary in both languages (all languages)

The work being done is encouraging but African scholars have to begin to reflect on the priority that has to be given to language in education. It is therefore necessary to create and adapt materials that teachers can use for classrooms where the learners speak different languages. Electronic flash cards can be provided, audio and video materials of the same lessons and a structured support system for teachers.

In terms of teacher education, since most of African schools have at least two languages represented in the classrooms, teacher need to be trained on how to create an inclusive environment where learners do not feel like foreigners in their towns and villages. Information and communication technology can facilitate quality teacher training and development. The prospects of the use of OER as one possible way to deal with language in education should be a source of encouragement for all. Language should be viewed as a resource and particularly the home languages of the learners should represent a wealth of previous knowledge that can be tapped into. The important questions that we have to address are:

- Are teachers and teacher educators aware of the complexities of teaching in a multilingual classroom?
- How should teachers be supported to become excellent teachers in multilingual classrooms?
- What strategies can be used and shared?
- What tools are tried and tested?
- How can language learning tools and materials be adapted for use in multilingual contexts?
- How can two or more languages be used simultaneously to support learning?

CHALLENGES OF USING OER TO SUPPORT TEACHERS IN MULTILINGUAL CONTEXTS

No doubt there are challenges to the use of OER in multilingual context. As with most situations, there are issues we need to consider and process which we have to rethink and debate but that is a healthy way forward. The first reaction might be that this is an impossible task and that solving or reducing the language in education problems is not where OER can contribute. We must however consider that two decades ago, if we were told about the extent of use of the internet (Facebook, Twitter, Skype etc.) most of us would have argued. We first have to understand the place of language in education, the challenges faced by learners who lack proficiency in the language of teaching and learning, the effects of these challenges on their attitude to learning and their psychological well-being. In fact, research has linked lack of proficiency in the language of teaching and learning to achievement. It is

certainly worth our while as teachers and teacher educator to explore every avenue to address the language challenges.

There are also the challenges already associated with e-learning such as access for those in rural or remote areas, training of prospective end users, technology barriers for those who have no access to the necessary resources. These challenges are real but not doing anything at all should not be an option.

CONCLUSION

Teachers need more support and better preparation in order to be effective in multilingual classrooms and in order for them to be functional facilitators of learning and in order for them to make any meaningful impact within the multilingual contexts. The teachers can thereby subsequently create conducive learning environments and conditions which will enable learners in multilingual contexts to succeed in school. The learners deserve teachers who are properly trained to meet their needs just as much as the teachers require support to cope with and address the needs of their learners. The opportunity that the use of OER provides cannot be understated. The broadening use of OER should therefore be further expanded to include the teaching and learning strategies in multilingual classrooms, the use of the learners' home languages and the languages represented in the classrooms as resources that support learning and to tap into the wealth of previous knowledge that the learners brings to class but are unable to express due to the language barrier. Exploring the use OER in multilingual context can only bring us one step closer to further understanding and mediating the challenges of language in education.

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