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USING OERS IN EMERGENCY DISTANCE LANGUAGE LEARNING: A CASE STUDY

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Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic forced us to reconsider the entire higher education system and offer distance education. However, lecturers at the University of Torino had an advantage over their colleagues, since the University had already launched a series of open online courses in the academic year 2018-2019 with the Start@unito project, aimed at both prospective students and first-year students.

This paper focuses on Modern Language courses. The aim of our research is to understand if and how the Start@unito Open Education Resources (OERs) have been integrated in Emergency Remote Education (Bozkurt, 2020) to promote learner autonomy in achieving the required level in the 4 linguistic competences (listening, reading, speaking, writing). Though limited to a relatively small number of respondents, our research can be considered a reflection based on experience to integrate and enhance OERs as an additional resource for teachers and students to encourage learner autonomy.

Keywords: Learner autonomy; Distance learning; OER; ERE; Second language learning; Language skills

1 INTRODUCTION

Due to the Covid-19 outbreak in the spring of 2020, lecturers and students had to adjust to a new instructional setting almost overnight: on the one hand, lecturers had to adapt the activities and contents planned for in-person classes to online classes; on the other hand, students could not rely on constant exposure and immediate feedback and had to learn more autonomously.

However, the University had already launched a series of open online courses in the academic year 2018-2019 with the Start@Unito project. In particular, the Department of Foreign Languages already offered 6 first-year undergraduate modules in Modern Languages (French, German, English, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish), aimed at both prospective students and first-year university students. Start@Unito has been extensively studied as a form of OER to bridge over the passage from secondary to higher education: first, it has proved useful as a chance for secondary school teachers to broaden their horizons and to help students acquire the key competences (knowledge, abilities and attitudes) to become aware global citizens (Marchisio *et al.*, 2019a). Secondly, it has been studied as a way to train lecturers to update their digital skills and to approach online teaching (Marchisio *et al.*, 2019b). From both perspectives, studies focus on Start@unito as a useful tool to help teachers provide quality activities and reliable ready-to-use materials to enhance the effectiveness of their lessons.

As shown by previous studies, the educational experience lecturers and students have had during the waves of the Covid outbreak can be described as Emergency Remote Education (ERE), a branch of distance education referring to the sudden, unplanned, and temporary transition of in-person classes onto digital platforms (Bozkurt, 2020). UNESCO (2020b) encouraged implementation of OERs to support learning and knowledge worldwide during the pandemic. Actually, OERs had already been identified as an effective means of building open and inclusive knowledge societies and to achieving the objectives of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals regarding education (UNESCO 2020a, Ossianniilsson *et al.*, 2020). A survey on ERE in different countries investigated the challenges and the integration of OERs into the educational response to the crisis (Ossianniilsson *et al.*, 2020). The investigation focuses on the employment OERs (Open Education Resources) and OEPs (Open Education Practices) during the Covid-19 crisis, indicating that there are still gaps in the effort to move from awareness raising about OERs to OEPs, that is a changed mindset, attitudes, and values

regarding a culture of openness. The link between OERs and flexible, self-paced learning had already been identified before the pandemic (Huang *et al*, 2020, Ossiannilsson *et al.*, 2020). When the need for flexible, self-paced and self-directed learning became urgent, OERs were bound to come into play. Studies on ERE show that self-paced learning played a relevant role potentially making it a more learner-centred approach (Benson, 2001) than traditional teaching. Indeed, studies show that opportunities offered by ERE, such as the massive use of asynchronous classes, rely on and subsequently promote learner autonomy, which is an essential skill for both academic and life-long learning (Amin and Sundari, 2020), as suggested also by Benson (2001) and Pekkanli Egel (2009) well before the pandemic outbreak. Before being monopolized by issues related to the pandemic, studies on language teaching focused on enhancing learner autonomy and control over the language learning process particularly in Higher Education (HE) (Littlemore, 2001). More specifically, technologies had been investigated in CALL research (Computer-Assisted Language Learning) concerning learner autonomy and self-directed learning. New technologies have the potential to increase learner autonomy in the 4 different skills (for example, reading and writing emails, listening and speaking in videoconferencing and help learners develop critical thinking skills as they have to evaluate and select information (Littlemore, 2001, Little, 2020). Interestingly, the OER topic is reported as one of the least investigated ones in studies on CALL (Gillespie, 2020, Godwin-Jones, 2017), even though it is a way to provide teachers with reliable, ready-to-use material to meet students' needs under normal circumstances and even more during an emergency. To this end, the present paper aims to understand if and how the Start@unito Open Education Resources (OERs) have been integrated into Emergency Remote Education (Bozkurt, 2020) to promote learner autonomy in achieving the required level in the 4 linguistic competences (listening, reading, speaking, writing). In line with other studies on ERE and adopting a learner-centred approach, a survey was carried. The research questions addressed in this case study are:

RQ1 To what extent have OERs been integrated into second language courses during the pandemic regarding the four language skills?

RQ2: What role could OERs play in enabling autonomous language learning in student and lecturer perceptions?

This paper provides reflections on possible ways of integrating OERs with ERE. First, the methodology of data collection and analysis will be explained, secondly data will be discussed and finally, data-driven reflections will be provided to shed light on useful tools for lecturers and students to cope with possible future emergencies.

2 METHODOLOGY

This case study draws on data collected on language courses taught at the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures of the University of Turin, which had the opportunity to rely on OER courses provided by the platform Start@unito. As shown in the literature review, Start@unito itself was an interesting and almost unique experiment in Italy of possible integration of OER resources into second language teaching. Therefore, it is relevant to investigate how and to what extent its resources were used in ERE. This could shed light on weak and strong points of OER current practices, so that possible improvements regarding the integration of OERs in language teaching can be envisaged.

The originality of this study relies on the perspective adopted, which narrows down on a specific issue of concern for second language teaching and investigates the use of OERs in different waves of the pandemic, so that medium-term shifts in teaching practices can be identified. Moreover, it adopts a comparative approach by dealing with more than one second language, which makes it different from other studies on ERE.

Data was collected through questionnaires which were sent in May 2020 to second-language experts teaching at the university of Turin; more specifically, the languages involved are English, German, French, Spanish, Portuguese and Russian. The respondents to both questionnaires teach Spanish (31%), English (25%), German (25%), French (6%), Russian (6%) and Portuguese (6%). The percentages of the students who answered are the following: 97.7 % Spanish and 3.3% Portuguese students for the first questionnaire; 64% Spanish, 25% French, 7.1% Russian, 3,6 Portuguese for the second one.

The lecturer questionnaire is divided into 3 sections investigating how courses were taught during the pandemic and how Start@Unito resources were used before and during the Covid-19 emergency. The student questionnaire is divided into two parts focusing on their experience using OERs regarding the four skills during ERE. Data was updated through a follow-up questionnaire in February 2021 to investigate possible changes in the integration of OERs in their courses during the academic year 2020-21, which was taught online from the beginning. Both students and lecturers' questionnaires were anonymous and consisted of closed-ended, open-ended questions and Likert-scale-based

questions made up of 5 or 10 response anchors asking the respondents to evaluate the quality of the resources in question with the aim of improving linguistic competences. Each questionnaire took approximately 15 minutes to complete.

Data from the answers to closed-ended questions were analyzed quantitatively, whereas open comments elicited through open-ended questions were considered qualitative data, providing a better understanding of the respondents' perceptions.

3 RESULTS

RQ1 To what extent have OERs been integrated into second language courses during the pandemic regarding the four language skills?

Generally speaking, data show that the increased workload was an issue of concern for 88% of the lecturers, as students were more demanding and had additional needs, such as the need for information, feedback, human contact and human relationship with their teachers. There is no significant difference depending on the language taught. As data shows, *feedback and correction* was an issue of concern for 44% of the respondents and *lesson planning and preparation of materials* was mentioned by 50% of the sample. When the same question was asked to the student sample on a Likert scale from 1 to 5, they answered as follows: 43.3% said the workload was comparable to that of the in-person lessons, 12,5% answered that they had not noticed any increase, and only 6.3 stated that there had been a remarkable increase.

From the lecturer perspective, effective and ready-to-use open-source materials could have played a key role. However, 56% of the respondents reported that they *never used* them and 13% that they *rarely* used them, whereas only 19% used them sometimes and 13% used them often. Although 88% of the students reported an increased workload, only 44% used the Start@unito OERs. If we consider the different languages, only Russian and English did not use the Start@unito resources at all (concerning English, this may be partly explained by noticing that the Start@unito course was a linguistics course rather than a language course). There are no substantial differences among the other languages. We asked the students why they used the Start@unito platform, giving them different options: 53.6% of them used Start@unito to review the subjects covered during the lesson, 25% to carry out tasks proposed by the lecturer, and 17.9% did not use the platform at all. Moreover, 25% of the students stated that the Start@unito OERs entirely replaced the in-person language course, while 32.1% used the available resources to prepare for the final exam. In addition, 78.1% of the students reported using Start@unito resources to study, while 21.9% also used other platforms.

Narrowing the analysis on the lecturers who used open online resources (44% of the sample), data show that 50% of them followed the department guidelines, 33% decided autonomously and 17% agreed on what to do with colleagues. By contrast, lecturers who did not use the Start@unito OERs stated either that they were not aware of their existence (13%), or that they preferred their own materials (13%) or that using them was time-consuming (7%) or that they did not have the right credentials to access them (7%). However, in those cases where the Start@unito resources were used, data show that they were successfully integrated with ERE.

With reference to the activities that benefited the most from the use of online open resources, listening and reading were chosen by 57% of lecturers, writing was chosen by 42% and speaking by 29%. Out of 16 respondents, only 2 used the Start@unito resources in their classes (listening, reading, speaking, writing) to introduce or consolidate topics that they had dealt with in their online lessons. As far as the different languages are concerned, German lecturers used them to improve all 4 skills; Spanish and Portuguese lecturers used them for speaking activities; English and Russian lecturers did not use them at all.

Regarding the integration of the Start@unito OERs into second language courses, data concerning the first semester of the academic year 20-21 do not show any relevant increase. The second questionnaire shows that 88% of the respondents did not use the Start@unito resources because they preferred using materials tailored on their students' needs (50%) or taken from the study book (21%); in addition, some lecturers did not consider them relevant for the course (29%), or they did not know about their availability (28%). If compared to the spring 2020, it seems that the number of lecturers who used Start@unito resources in the winter term has decreased. Analysing the data with reference to the different languages, it can be noticed that the German and the French lecturers opted for self-prepared materials because Start@unito resources were not relevant for their courses.

The percentages of students who availed themselves only of Start@unito resources and those who used also different materials remain the same.

RQ2: What role could OERs play in encouraging autonomous language learning in student and lecturer perceptions?

Out of 16 lecturers, only 6 respondents expressed their opinion on the usefulness of Start@unito resources during the pandemic, stating that they provided students with deeper knowledge (6), motivation (1), self-evaluation (2); indeed, the exercises with keys or automated feedback proved particularly useful. Drawing on their one-year experience of ERE, our respondents identified some needed improvements concerning OERs, stating that OERs should provide students with self-evaluation and self-study materials. In addition, they think that students should be supported to be able to engage in activities involving digital skills such as video-making. All these activities should ideally be designed to promote learner autonomy.

Among the few students who reported using OERs autonomously, 87.5% employed exclusively materials already available on the Start@unito platform, while only 12.5% (students of Spanish, English and Portuguese) used other applications to improve their language skills (Youtube, Duolingo, radio apps). The second questionnaire reveals a slight improvement in the use of external tools to support their learning. To be more precise, 33% of the students reported using Youtube, web pages, Duolingo, Bab.la, Udemy.

The Start@unito OERs lacked specific resources aimed at improving students' speaking skills. To solve this problem, it appears that students made use of external resources: 46.9% utilized language learning applications, 37.5% applications of linguistic exchange with native speakers, while a small percentage opted for a personal tutor, self-corrected or automatically corrected exercises, or simply chose to wait until in-person classes resumed. Furthermore, we asked students to compare OER-based automatically corrected exercises with traditional exercises carried out in the classroom and corrected by the teacher: 59.4% found them equivalent, 31.3% easier, while 9.4% found them more difficult.

One of the aims of our questionnaires was understanding whether using OERs could, at least partially, solve the problem of the lack of interaction. We asked them to evaluate their competences on a scale from 1 to 10 (1 being the minimum and 10 the maximum levels of competence) after the online course. The results show that:

- writing: 22.6% answered 5 and 22,6% 6
- speaking: 25.8% answered 6 and 40.7% gave an answer in the range from 1 to 5
- listening: 22.6% answered 7 while 25.8% 8
- reading comprehension: 25.8% answered 8.

Overall, the level of competence acquired by the students at the end of the course can be regarded as satisfactory for listening and reading and not satisfactory for speaking and writing.

In light of the students' previous answers, we asked them if the lack of interaction had influenced their final evaluation (we used a Likert scale from 1 to 5 where 1 stands for not at all influenced and 5 very influenced): 3.7% answered not at all influenced, 44.4% not very influenced, 33% was neutral, 7.4% very influenced, 11.1% very much influenced.

4 CONCLUSIONS

In the present study we have asked ourselves how Open Educational Resources (OERs) have been integrated with distance teaching during the pandemic. Given the increased workload for both lecturers and students, we expected the Start@unito resources to be employed extensively. The results show that regardless of the language taught, lecturers resorted to the existing OERs only marginally. Although there is a general agreement on the importance of integrating OERs into ERE, a practice encouraged also by the UNESCO document on inclusive education (UNESCO 2020 b), our study demonstrates that having ready and available resources is not enough to use them in open educational practices (OEP). Start@unito courses, for example, originally had a different purpose, in that they were specifically designed for those students wishing to study autonomously (such as students in their last year of high school, working students, students who live far away from the university headquarters) or to promote inclusive education using computer-assisted technology for language learning (CALL). Moreover, Start@unito courses were designed to be self-sufficient and self-contained. Hence the difficulty in adapting these resources into ERE practices.

Regarding the 4 basic language skills, our data show that the Start@unito OERs were used mainly to improve listening and reading and less when it came to speaking and writing. The latter, in fact, require personalized feedback which falls outside the scope of Start@unito courses. In the evaluation of their competences, students stressed the importance of face-to-face time with the lecturer and immediate feedback to improve their speaking and writing skills respectively. In fact, this problem was solved by using the Webex platform where lecturers held synchronous lessons trying to increase student talking time, and writings were either corrected collectively during such lessons or individually

via email. Conversely, the OERs available on Start@unito proved to be a valuable asset to integrate into lessons for reading and listening comprehension. The reason why not many lecturers decided to use them is twofold: first, as said before, the courses were designed to be self-sufficient and the resources were often consequential and “rigid” in their structure; second, not all lecturers were familiar with the Start@unito resources, as the project was still in its infancy when the pandemic started. Moreover, the Start@unito resources were used mainly for self-correction and self-study by those students who were already autonomous learners or wished to take a step towards becoming one.

Another critical point regarding OERs lies in the need for personalization of contents and activities, highlighted by both lecturers and students. When asked about the level of difficulty of the exercises proposed on Start@unito, the answers given by students are equally distributed between “easy” and “difficult”. This shows one of the limits of using OERs for language learning: not all learners have the same linguistic level, therefore the one-size-fits-all approach is often not feasible.

Focusing now on our second research question, namely using OERs to promote learner autonomy, a key factor seems to be the possibility to provide students with automated feedback. Appropriate feedback is essential to keep motivation and self-efficacy alive and to guide students in their path towards learning and self-learning, thus facilitating the teacher’s work. The necessity to give feedback to the students was identified as the main cause of the increased workload for lecturers, which the students, in turn, confirmed. Already in the first questionnaire, students’ comments the lack of interaction with the lecturer and of resources with automatic correction to prepare them for final exams. At the same time, lecturers also stressed the need for OERs that foster learning autonomy and activities that provide students with feedback. It seems, then, that future research should go in the direction of creating resources that promote learner autonomy, so that teachers may truly take on the role of facilitators and so that distance education may become fertile soil for good educational practices.

To conclude, the first limitation of this study is the small number of replies received from both students and lecturers, although the answers are in line with the general trends, we noticed throughout the implementation of ERE. Secondly, the data collected shed light on the need for common policies and guidelines shared with all the teachers of a department. Finally, distance learning opened the door to the extensive use of technology in teaching and learning foreign languages. The Covid-19 emergency made it clear that we need to find new teaching and learning strategies to replace traditional teacher-centred lessons. This is even truer when it comes to language students, since languages are constantly evolving and there is no such thing as knowing a language without constant training and autonomous learning. A further area of future investigation is teacher training on how to use OERs and integrate them in a flexible teaching practice in order to meet students’ needs and face unpredictable circumstances more efficiently.

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