



The Benefits of Using Open Educational Resources

by [*Charity Davenport*](#), [*Chadia Mansour*](#), and [*Sharon Tjaden-Glass*](#)

English language teaching and learning communities around the world are facing educational inequity. While the information and resources divide could also apply to regions within the developed world, it is amplified in the underresourced communities of the developing world. In sub-Saharan communities, English teaching resources are critically limited (Modisaotsile, 2012) and teachers face many challenges, including lack of textbooks, libraries, and exposure to language usage (Kuchah, 2016).

These problems have been exacerbated by the effects of the pandemic. As teachers rushed to shift to remote teaching, traditional printed and copyrighted textbooks have failed to meet the needs of English language teaching and learning communities even within developed countries. The dependence on traditional textbooks has left many teachers without knowledge of digital resources that can be used to engage students in learning during these difficult times. In addition, remote learning often works best with more flexible and editable materials that teachers can easily adapt as learning conditions change.

Unfortunately, the digital divide between students who have sufficient and reliable access to high-speed internet and digital devices and those who don't has also been exposed by this virus. Now more than ever before, open educational resources (OER) are needed to help narrow the ever-widening digital divide.

Problems With Copyrighted Materials in ESL Instruction

Understanding copyright protections is often an issue in which teachers are not well-versed. One common misconception that often leads to violations is related to online materials: Just because materials are accessible via the internet, that doesn't mean teachers can legally use them.

The protections of copyright begin as soon as a work is created, whether it's a lesson plan, a worksheet, an image, or any other creative work. Therefore, even if a teacher finds a great *New York Times* article to share with students, they are not legally permitted to print out a copy of that article and distribute it to their students. Downloading a copy of the article is also illegal. Providing students with a direct link to the article is best, but what if that article needs to be adapted to your students' level? Copyright doesn't allow for individual revisions.

Few traditional ESL textbooks offer online resources or eBook versions, and ones that do cost just as much or even more than their printed counterparts, or the additional resources do not meet students' needs. Copyright protections for the digital resources of traditional printed textbooks often create barriers to access for teachers and students, including the necessity for digital accounts and passwords, not to mention the difficulty of teachers and students learning to navigate multiple digital interfaces.

What Are OER?

OER differ from traditional copyrighted educational resources because they carry a different license than copyrighted materials. This difference in licensing permits users to take specific actions that would be forbidden with copyrighted materials. These specific actions are sometimes referred to as the “5Rs” of OER, which determine whether the material is truly “open” (see Figure 1). The material can be:

1. **retained** (you can download a copy)
2. **redistributed** (e.g., to your students)
3. **revised** (altered or modified)
4. **remixed** (combined with other OER or your own materials)
5. **reused** (by anyone with whom you share them)



Figure 1. Image by [BCOER Librarians](#) [CC BY 4.0](#). Taken from [BCcampus](#).

OER not only enable but facilitate the ability of teachers to use, edit, and share digital materials, including Word documents, PowerPoint presentations, Google apps, video files, and even simple web pages. OER add legally bound permissions on top of copyright, which give authors the right to give up some of their control so that users can do more with the work. These permissions are called Creative Commons licenses (see Figure 2).

Writing with Grammar

by Charity Davenport



Figure 2. Example of a website as an OER.

The Benefits of OER

As it involves copyright, OER can be complicated, but the benefits of using OER are significant.

- Using OER reduces textbook costs for students in higher education, saving students around US\$115 per course (Nyamweya, 2018).
- Using OER makes content more accessible because it is not locked behind a paywall or account, meaning that students don't need passwords to access materials, and teachers can modify materials without wondering if they are breaking the law.
- Using OER gives students more options on how to learn, not only by reading text but by watching videos or interacting with content.
- As OER is accessed digitally, there are more chances for interactivity instead of only reading or watching instructional content.
- As materials can be tailored for each student's needs and teacher's classroom contexts, OER help teachers help students reach learning outcomes.
- OER textbooks can be easily edited to include the most up-to-date information, which is especially useful in any field where information quickly becomes outdated or even obsolete between editions of printed textbooks.

OER have many benefits that revolve around improving the quality of teaching and learning through shared educational innovation and pedagogy. OER also play a role in improving educational content through teachers' communities of practices.

A Sample Open Educational Resource and How to Use It

OER can vary widely. They can be as large as full courses and complete textbooks and as small as short lessons and worksheets. They can be images, Word files, Google Slides, webpages, and YouTube videos. OER can fit into whatever you need it to fit in and can be used to supplement traditional textbooks or replace them.

[Here is an example chapter from an open textbook.](#) It contains questions to think about before reading, a vocabulary exercise, and comprehension and critical thinking questions. This example textbook chapter is at a low B2 CEFR level and is targeted to adult learners in higher education. Let's say you are interested in using this chapter for one of your courses, but you teach intermediate middle school students. Thanks to the Creative Commons licensing of this OER, you are free to copy this material and edit it to fit your curricular and classroom needs. We recommend using the [COCA Corpus](#) to adapt works with more frequently used vocabulary and [RoadtoGrammar](#) to analyze the CEFR level of OER and subsequent adapted texts.

See Figure 3 for an example of an [OER YouTube video](#) geared toward teaching ESL teachers how to turn their already existing materials into OER (Tjaden-Glass, 2020).

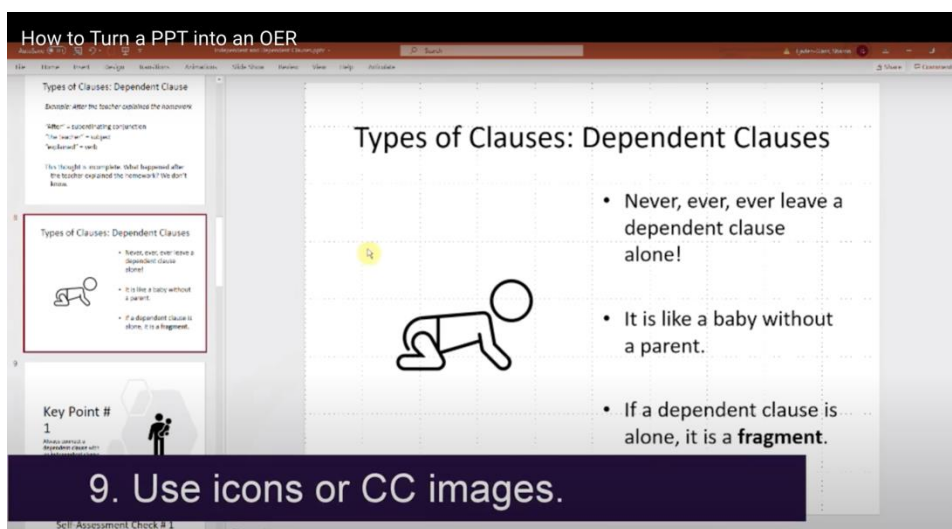


Figure 3. Example of YouTube video as an OER, licensed CC-BY 4.0.

Learn More About OER

If you are interested in learning more about the OER movement and open pedagogy, we are heading an OER initiative for TESOL International Association and have teamed up with the Computer-Assisted Language Learning Interest Section to offer a webinar with more information to get teachers started with the basics of OER, including how to find and use them. We also hope to share how OER can be helpful during this extraordinary time, and how it can also be just as

helpful once we “return to normal.” We hope that using OER will become the “new normal” for many teachers.

The webinar will be Saturday, 23 January, 9–10 am EST. Look for upcoming updates in the Computer-Assisted Language Learning Interest Section discussion board in the [MyTESOL Lounge](#).

References

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Charity Davenport (MS in TESOL) is an instructor at the English Language Institute at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. She is also working on a second master’s degree, this one in instructional technology. She is the author of the open textbook [It’s All Greek to Me!](#) and an open English as a second language resource “[Writing with Grammar](#).”

Chadia Mansour is pursuing her doctorate in online and distributed learning. She has 17+ years of international teaching experience (English as a foreign language, English as a second language, English for specific purposes, discourse and culture) in physical and blended modes. Her latest leadership project targets narrowing the information and digital gaps within the English language teaching communities through access to OERs.

Sharon Tjaden-Glass is an instructional media designer for the eLearning Division of Sinclair Community College in Dayton, Ohio. Her current areas of research interest include intercultural communication, instructional design, OERs, and second language listening instruction. She is the current community manager for TESOL International Association’s Intercultural Communication Interest Section.