





The Potential of Open Educational Resources for English Language Teaching and Learning: From Selection to Adaptation

Finding affordable textbooks is a challenge within many educational contexts, including English as a foreign language (EFL) settings and English as a second language (ESL) settings, such as universities and Intensive English Programs (often referred to as IEPs) in the United States. As educators, we know it is a struggle for many of our students to pay for both English language learning classes and expensive textbooks. Open Educational Resources (OERs) can alleviate this challenge by offering high-quality, free materials. This article outlines how to find and adapt OERs and discusses a specific example of remixing OERs for the language classroom. Our hope is that other educators will be inspired to create and adapt OERs and incorporate the materials into their own teaching contexts to better serve their student populations.

BACKGROUND

It is important to understand how OERs work. OERs are permanently licensed under “a Creative Commons license or other permission to let you know how the material may be used, reused, adapted, and shared” (OER Commons 2022). In the Creative Commons licenses, each condition or rule is represented by a symbol:

-  Attribution (BY): This symbol means that the author of the original source must be credited.
-  ShareAlike (SA): This means that the materials must be shared under a similar license, so you cannot take these open resources and then republish them under a less open license.
-  NonCommercial (NC): This requires that the work be used for noncommercial purposes, so people can’t republish and sell the resource.
-  NoDerivatives (ND): This symbol means the materials can be reused but cannot be changed or adapted.

While you may also find material listed in the Public Domain or CC0—where copyrights are released, and there are no rules or restrictions on how it can be used—most OER materials have some restrictions. The most common Creative Commons restriction is Attribution, a license that allows people to reuse, change, republish, and even sell the materials as long as the original author is credited. Other materials may have multiple restrictions. For example, they may have an Attribution ShareAlike license, meaning that the materials can be republished, changed, and shared freely as long as the original author is credited and the resulting materials are published under a similar license. Most Creative Commons licenses permit people to make changes (derivatives), allowing them to remix and adapt existing OER materials, unless the licenses specifically state “NoDerivatives.” The ability to adapt OERs has created a community of educators who develop, use, and revise open materials.

Some colleges have redesigned their programs to rely solely on OER textbooks, promising students zero textbook costs throughout their entire degree programs (Burke 2019). This has led to the creation of hundreds, if not thousands, of OER textbooks aimed especially at college students (see Table 1 for examples).

Still, using OER materials requires certain considerations. Kendra Staley, English Language Specialist and one of the authors of this article, explored some of these issues firsthand with 42 EFL teachers at Binational Centers (BNCs) in Colombia while conducting virtual teacher-training workshops about online learning. She developed one of the workshops based on an article about 11 high-quality OERs for beginning to advanced English language learners (Burrows 2021), one of which is the authors’ textbook on university reading (Mitchell, Burrows, and Staley 2020). Because these 11 OERs range in difficulty from A1 to B2 on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) scale in skill-focus (reading, writing, listening, speaking, grammar, or a combination of skills) and topics (university preparation, speed reading, detective stories, English in the workplace, academic writing and reading, and Greek myths), there was plenty of high-quality, free material to choose from. After examining these OERs, BNC teachers proceeded to find other OER materials for their own student populations. The process of finding and adapting OERs will be explored in the subsequent sections, along with additional examples.

Four Interesting Titles to Search for in OER Commons or on Google

A Digital Workbook for Beginning ESOL by Eric Dodson, Davida Jordan, and Timothy Krause (Low Beginner to Low Intermediate) is a grammar-focused introductory book that weaves in YouTube videos and auto-graded practice.

Daily Departures: Speed Reading Passages for Low-Intermediate English Language Learners by Regina Weaver is a digital packet of 20 short readings with comprehension questions to help students improve their reading speed.

Fiction in Action: Whodunit by Adam Gray and Marcos Benevides (Intermediate) is an alternative graded reader with playful activities.

It’s All Greek to Me!—Using Authentic Readings to Improve Knowledge of the English Language and Western Culture by Charity Davenport (Advanced) is an integrated-skills book that uses authentic sources to teach culture and language.

Table 1. Four interesting OER titles

FINDING OERS

OERs are available all over the web, but it may be easiest to search for them within a specific OER database, such as OER Commons (oercommons.org), MERLOT (merlot.org), or Teaching Commons (teachingcommons.us). The same resources are often listed in all three databases, so educators can focus on learning to use just one. In this article, we will be discussing OER Commons, which is easy to use and has thousands of resources at all grade levels. When using OER Commons, it may be tempting to just search for EFL (or related terms, such as ESOL, EAL, and ESL) and wade through the 500-plus results, but it is often more productive to use the filters. Two filters that will quickly narrow your search are “Education Level” and “Material Type.” With the “Material Type” filter, you can focus your results on lesson plans, lectures, or entire textbooks. You can also use the filters to find resources that were made for other contexts but might be adapted for your setting. If you are not limited to ESL resources, you can search for themes that relate to your students’ interests. Perhaps resources on art, public speaking, or health might be interesting. Then with the “License Types” filter, you can identify materials to adapt or remix, which allows you to take materials at different education levels or from different subjects and adapt them to fit your context.

The BNC participants used these filters in OER Commons to identify over 20 resources for use in their classes. Engaging and motivating examples from their exploration of OER Commons included an activity sheet on biodiversity in nature for young learners; instructional videos focused on adapting to change for university business students; units on freedom of speech; assignments to develop critical thinking; and a unit plan for a writing class about creating comic strips to encourage teenagers’ autonomy. The participants, in their analysis of each OER, focused on its advantages and disadvantages, its application and usefulness for their students and instructors, and any of its accompanying websites, apps, or assessments. They also

discussed how to adapt the materials for their settings, such as supplementing textbooks. For other educational environments, these resources could support, or even replace, any coursebooks that might be assigned by the school administration or program director.

Additionally, many EFL teachers are required to use coursebooks mandated by ministries of education. Because no textbook is perfect, educators around the world could supplement their course materials by searching an OER database to find and adapt activities that fit the needs of their particular student population. For example, in Uzbekistan, the Ministry of Education produces a student textbook with audio files, a teacher’s answer key, and instructions on how to deliver the material. For Grade 8, the content theme for Unit 9 is the environment, with a focus on raising awareness about the importance of being eco-friendly, preserving resources, and recycling. EFL teachers in Uzbekistan could search OER Commons for related material that is of interest to their students. In the search bar, they could type “Earth Day,” which is an international event that celebrates ways people protect their environment. For the “Education Level” filter, they could select “High School,” and for the “Subject Area,” they could select “English Language Arts.” A result of this search is a lesson plan for English language learners to practice and improve their speaking, reading, writing, and vocabulary skills by learning about Earth Day. These teachers can then adapt the materials to fit their educational context while continuing to support the curriculum and standards created by their Ministry of Education.

ADAPTING OERS

While the adaptation process can be time consuming and onerous, it isn’t always. Sometimes a few tweaks make a resource more engaging and effective. This is where a clear understanding of both your students and the OER materials will be essential. Materials may need to be adapted for language difficulty, cultural responsiveness, and approach to teaching.

There are several ways to think about and address language difficulty. For a smaller OER, you might intuitively look at a text and change individual words that seem difficult for your students. You might also break up long sentences so that they are more easily understood. These two factors—vocabulary difficulty and sentence length—are at the core of modern readability measures, so you may also use a tool to help you analyze a text’s difficulty. For example, you can determine the Lexile level of a passage by using the Lexile Text Analyzer at <https://hub.lexile.com/analyzer>, which will give the passage a score up to 2000L (the highest level). The higher the score, the more difficult the reading. Furthermore, research has correlated Lexile measure to language proficiency on the CEFR, so you can use Lexile to better understand if a text is right for your students. Table 2 summarizes Smith and Turner’s (2016) correlations of different readers’ CEFR and Lexile levels.

Note that students at these CEFR levels can often comprehend more-difficult texts (Smith and Turner 2016), but this chart is a nice starting point when adapting materials. You can run an OER through the Lexile Text Analyzer, then change the vocabulary and sentence length, if needed, until the Lexile level seems appropriate for your students’ approximate level. Using this analytical approach to adapt the materials is helpful when you are working with longer OERs.

Another point to consider when adapting materials created for other contexts is cultural responsiveness. You want the materials to

not only be appropriate, but also relatable for your students from different cultural backgrounds. For example, you may want to remove references that may be upsetting or unnecessarily controversial. Those references could pertain not only to cultural practices but also to borders and country names. Additionally, you may want to integrate references to the local area and students’ cultural heritage in the OERs. For example, you might change the names of the characters in a story or replace unfamiliar details. These changes will help your students connect to the materials, build on their previous knowledge, and likely increase engagement.

For instance, let’s return to the previous Earth Day example for EFL teachers in Uzbekistan who found a lesson plan that fits the content, age level, and standards of their unit on the environment. However, when looking through the lesson plan, they realize that some of the activities, such as visiting a local recycling center, might not be relevant for their students. While there are people who do collect recyclable materials from neighborhoods, there isn’t a local recycling center for them to visit, nor are there recycling receptacles around the city or their school. Instead of focusing on what other countries do for recycling (and what’s not available in theirs), these teachers could ask their students to discuss ways to reduce trash production, such as taking reusable cloth bags to local markets instead of using plastic bags. Or, teachers could ask their students to bring in used plastic bottles that are clean and empty, which they can repurpose for classroom use, such as plant holders.

CEFR Level		Lexile Level of Graded Readers
Basic User	A1	230L to 340L
	A2	425L to 715L
Independent User	B1	518L to 860L
	B2	598L to 993L
Proficient User	C1	760L to 1200L

Table 2. CEFR and Lexile correlations (see Smith and Turner 2016)

Educational institutes in Uzbekistan are full of flowers and plants in the hallways, yards, offices, and classrooms. Connecting the class material on the environment to their cultural love of decorating with living plants will likely increase engagement and perhaps motivate students to repurpose other materials in their own homes with their families.

Finally, and possibly most importantly for language educators, you may want to adapt the approach to teaching that you find in the materials. If you choose to use materials that were not originally intended to teach English, you will want to change the activities to match communicative language teaching pedagogy. That may require you to create more discussion activities, for example. You may also need to add explicit language support and instruction. With some OERs, that might mean creating vocabulary or other skill-building activities.

The goal of any adaptation is to make the resource more approachable, appropriate, and effective for your specific educational context. That means each educator will want and need to select different materials and make different changes. Compared to the traditional textbook market, it's exciting to be able to reshape and repackage OERs for your own classes.

EXAMPLE OF AN OER PROJECT

This section describes a large-scale OER project and explains how the materials were selected, adapted, and leveraged to meet students' needs. The project was funded through a grant from Colorado's Department of Higher Education and used open educational materials that were originally produced for students in their first year of university and then adapted for ESL/EFL students to serve a language-learning purpose. The result was an authentic, rigorous textbook titled *Preparing for University Reading* (Mitchell, Burrows, and Staley 2020), created to teach academic reading skills to advanced English language learners.

To engage students, the authors—who are also the authors of this article—took the reading passages in *Preparing for University Reading* from textbooks used in freshman-level courses in the five most popular majors, which according to the National Center for Education Statistics (2018) are business, health and biology, social sciences and history, psychology, and engineering. Our team searched for relevant textbooks in OER Commons and other OER databases and identified four relevant textbooks and one online course. One chapter from each of the four textbooks published by OpenStax were selected:

- *Biology 2e* (Clark, Douglas, and Choi 2018)
- *Introduction to Business* (Gitman et al. 2018)
- *Introduction to Sociology 2e* (Griffiths, Keirns, Strayer et al. 2015)
- *Psychology 2e* (Spielman, Jenkins, and Lovett 2020)

The online course from The Open University was titled *An Introduction to Design Engineering* (Jones 2018). Each selection was approximately 20 pages long. The hope was that by having these longer texts, students would have authentic reading experiences; in fact, at university, they might be required to read about 40 pages per week per class, so these longer texts would provide important practice (Anderson 2015).

We adapted the reading passages themselves because many traditional college students struggle with the reading demands at university, a problem that is even greater for language learners. This is, in part, because there is a readability gap between high school textbooks and university textbooks (Williamson 2008). High school textbooks are often written at a 1000–1100 Lexile level, while college textbooks are at a 1300–1400 Lexile level (Williamson 2008). In terms of language learning and the CEFR, a 1300–1400 Lexile level text may still be difficult for a C1 learner and beyond the comprehension level of many international students who

enter university at a B2 level or below (Smith and Turner 2016). This project narrowed the readability gap by adapting university-level OER readings to a 1100–1300 Lexile level. The Lexile tool measures both sentence length and the difficulty of the words in a passage; lowering the Lexile levels requires shortening some longer sentences and substituting some difficult vocabulary. For example, in the biology text, when highly specific vocabulary, like *germinate*, was not relevant to the chapter, we replaced it with more common vocabulary, like *grow*.

Being culturally responsive was also important to our team, so we adapted the passages with that in mind. For example, in the business chapter, we added more references to Chinese companies, since many of our students are from China and would be familiar with these case studies. In the engineering chapter, the original content assumed certain monuments and products would be familiar to the reader, but we thought students might struggle with the references, so we added context. Activities were also added so students could apply the knowledge in the different chapters to their personal lives and local contexts. Whenever text adaptations were made, they were done sparingly to help retain the authenticity of the readings and prepare students for studying at a U.S. university.

While the authentic, longer passages provided important, sustained practice, we also needed to adapt the chapters so that they were effective in a language-learning classroom. One way we did that was to divide the passages into four to six readings to allow for intermittent comprehension checks and varied classroom use. For example, an entire chapter could be assigned to students at once, representing the length of an authentic university reading assignment, or students could do each reading in the chapter over a period of weeks. The readings follow a predictable pattern. The first reading is always the shortest, often around 500 words, to allow for the topic to be introduced and discussed, while the last reading is usually the longest. Each chapter has at least two reading-skill

practice activities, and each reading has pre-reading activities, comprehension questions, vocabulary activities, and final discussion questions. At the end of a chapter, there is a synthesis section. While the original textbook passages came with a glossary and some comprehension questions that could be adapted, most of the comprehension and language practice was created specifically for our OER and for language learners. These changes were important and represented the unique demands of language education.

The OER project was piloted at two institutions, University of Colorado Boulder's International English Center and INTO Colorado State University. Piloting the book at two intensive English programs provided a fuller picture of how it could be used and how effective it might be. Feedback was overwhelmingly positive. Students felt that the adaptation process had made the OER more accessible; 85 percent of the 40 students surveyed thought the textbook overall was at their level or just a little above; they felt similarly about the difficulty of the passages themselves and the reading comprehension sections.

Eighty-eight percent of students recommended that their program continue to use the textbook, and all the faculty members recommended continuing to use the book. Students and faculty were interested in the book in part because it was a free, authentic textbook. Being free was important; many students struggle to afford textbooks, so they genuinely appreciated having a free resource, especially when it replaced an US\$80 textbook that had been used in one of the programs. Faculty also felt that students were motivated to read the passages since they were from real university textbooks. This authenticity helped students overcome what some might have felt was dry content. In fact, one student wrote, "It is a good book but a little bit boring. It is an academic book so it should be boring." Being based on real freshman-level readings was important to students, and they reported that it increased their motivation. Faculty also noted that

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

- What are Open Educational Resources?
 - o Open Educational Resources (OERs) are free materials that are in the public domain or have a Creative Commons license. While there are no limitations on how one can use, share, or adapt OERs in the public domain, the specific Creative Commons license might have stipulations, such as:
 - Attribution: Crediting the author
 - ShareAlike: Publishing any related materials under the same license
 - NonCommercial: Requiring that the materials not be used to make money
 - NoDerivatives: Disallowing users from changing or adapting the materials
- How do I find OERs?
 - o OERs are available all over the web, but it may be easiest to search for them within a specific OER database, like OER Commons (oercommons.org), MERLOT (merlot.org), or Teaching Commons (teachingcommons.us).
- How can I adapt OERs?
 - o As long as the OER doesn't have a "NoDerivatives" license, you can make any changes you would like to the material. You can change:
 - the OER's language difficulty, to make it match the level of your students. This can be done by using the Lexile Text Analyzer to estimate text difficulty; changing difficult vocabulary; and shortening sentences.
 - the OER's cultural responsiveness so that the OER builds on students' life experiences and culture. This is accomplished, in part, by changing the examples to match the local context and removing upsetting or unnecessarily controversial topics.
 - the OER's approach to teaching language, especially if it isn't the OER's original purpose, by adding language skill instruction; defining vocabulary; and designing discussion activities.

students' reading skills seemed to markedly improve.

This project is just one example of how teachers can leverage OERs to create effective, engaging, and authentic language practice for students. It is itself also OER licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution ShareAlike license, permitting further adaptation and localization and allowing use in different contexts and cultures around the world. Teachers can use a single reading to supplement their mandatory national curriculum or choose to use the

whole book. This flexibility is one of the benefits of OERs.

CONCLUSION

As some students may be unable to attend classes or to purchase textbooks due to their high cost, OERs offer a way to make education more accessible for more learners around the globe. In fact, in the United States, many students don't buy the textbooks for at least one of their university classes because of the high cost (Redden 2011). As educators, we want learning to be as accessible as possible for as many

people as we can. Eliminating the need and the requirement for students to purchase expensive textbooks helps to level the inequalities in education found around the world.

The overwhelmingly positive feedback from ESL university students in Colorado and EFL educators in Colombia demonstrates the usefulness and need for OERs in English language learning. Teachers know their students and are constantly looking for ways to help them succeed. This includes customizing content for students and courses, like the OER examples mentioned. Hopefully, other educators inspired by the OER selection and adaptation process detailed in this article will pursue the inclusion of OERs into their own classrooms for the benefit of their students.

REFERENCES

- Anderson, N. J. 2015. Academic reading expectations and challenges. In *ESL readers and writers in higher education: Understanding challenges, providing support*, ed. N. W. Evans, N. J. Anderson, and W. G. Eggington, 95–109. New York: Routledge.
- Burke, L. 2019. “OER Embraced.” *Inside Higher Ed*. <https://www.insidehighered.com/digital-learning/article/2019/09/19/california-community-colleges-implement-zero-textbook-cost>
- Burrows, K. M. 2021. High-quality open educational resources. *CoTESOL Newsletter*. <https://www.cotesol.org/resources/Documents/High%20Quality%20OERs-%20Katie%20Mitchell%20Burrows.pdf?cmid=ef245938-7fb9-4d32-a4c1-06fb07119629>
- Clark, M. A., M. Douglas, and J. Choi. 2018. *Biology 2e*. 2nd ed. Houston: OpenStax. <https://openstax.org/books/biology-2e>
- Gitman, L. J., C. McDaniel, A. Shah, M. Reece, L. Koffel, B. Talsma, and J. C. Hyatt. 2018. *Introduction to business*. Houston: OpenStax. <https://openstax.org/details/books/introduction-business>
- Griffiths, H., N. Keirns, E. Strayer et al. 2015. *Introduction to sociology 2e*. 2nd ed. Houston: OpenStax. <https://openstax.org/books/introduction-sociology-2e>
- Jones, D. 2018. *An introduction to design engineering*. 2nd ed. Milton Keynes, UK: The Open University. <https://www.open.edu/openlearn/science-maths-technology/engineering-technology/introduction-design-engineering/content-section-0?active-tab=content-tab>
- Mitchell, K., M. Burrows, and K. Staley. 2020. *Preparing for university reading*. Pressbooks. <https://universityreading.pressbooks.com/>
- National Center for Education Statistics. 2018. *Digest of Education Statistics, 2016: Chapter 3—Postsecondary Education*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d16/ch_3.asp
- OER Commons. 2022. “OER Commons & Open Education: The Future of Education, Co-Created With You.” OER Commons. <https://www.oercommons.org/about>
- Redden, M. 2011. 7 in 10 students have skipped buying a textbook because of its cost, survey finds. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. <http://chronicle.com/article/7-in-10-Students-Have-Skipped/128785/>
- Smith, M., and J. Turner. 2016. “The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) and The Lexile Framework for Reading: Bringing More Precision to Language Learning.” Durham, NC: MetaMetrics. https://metametricsinc.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/CEFR_1.pdf
- Spielman, R. M., W. J. Jenkins, and M. D. Lovett. 2020. *Psychology 2e*. 2nd ed. Houston: OpenStax. <https://openstax.org/details/books/psychology-2e>
- Williamson, G. L. 2008. A text readability continuum for postsecondary readiness. *Journal of Advanced Academics* 19 (4): 602–632.

Katie Mitchell Burrows has taught and coordinated ESL/EFL courses for over a decade in Germany, Thailand, Albania, and the United States. She was also an English Language Specialist in Nicaragua. She presents and writes about curriculum development, educational technology, game-based learning, and English for specific purposes.

Kendra Staley earned her MATESOL from the University of Washington, Seattle. Since 2005, she has taught ESL/EFL in the United States, Guatemala, China, Indonesia, Colombia, and Turkmenistan. She is currently a Coach with the English Speaking Nation program in Uzbekistan. Kendra has been an English Language Fellow and Specialist.

Matthew Burrows has an MATESOL from the University of Maryland, Baltimore County and has worked in ELT programs in the United States, Mexico, Japan, China, Thailand, India, Oman, the United Arab Emirates, and Namibia, where he was an English Language Fellow. Matthew’s focus is on EAP and academic literacy.