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Designing OERs to teach Italian pronunciation in an open educational environment: a case study

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Case Studies of Openness in the Language Classroom
Edited by Ana Beaven, Anna Comas-Quinn and Barbara Sawhill

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6 Designing OERs to Teach Italian Pronunciation in an Open Educational Environment: A Case Study

Anna Calvi¹, Anna Motzo² and Sandra Silipo³

Abstract

This case study reports on work that was carried out as part of a project developed by the Open University's Department of Languages (*Collaborative Writing and Peer Review*) between November 2011 and May 2012. The project was led by the Open University's LORO team and the participants were teachers in the Department of Languages. The teachers who took part in the project were interested in the collaborative production of OERs and in benefiting from each other's expertise and feedback in the field of online and blended language teaching and learning. The authors worked collaboratively in producing a set of online audio-visual materials aimed at helping students of Italian to master the pronunciation of five specific sounds. This process provided an example of how the production and design stage of OERs (which involved goal-setting, planning, researching and designing activities) benefited from openness and sharing. This case study is addressed to members of the online teaching community who are interested in the sharing of resources, practices and intellectual capital as a means to enhance professional development and raise individual tutors' and institutional profiles.

Keywords: peer-reviewing, professional development, online learning and teaching, open access resources, Jing, Italian, collaborative writing, OER, LORO, pronunciation.

1. The Open University in the West Midlands, UK; a.calvi@open.ac.uk

2. The Open University in London, UK; a.motzo@open.ac.uk

3. The Open University in Wales, UK; s.silipo@open.ac.uk

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1. The context

This section describes the institutional context and the specific project within which the authors collaboratively worked to produce a set of Italian language OERs.

1.1. The OU

The OU is a UK-wide Higher Education institution that offers distance tuition to adult (16+) learners. The Department of Languages currently offers language courses in French, German and Spanish (up to degree level) as well as Italian, Chinese, Welsh and English for Academic Purposes. All these modules offer blended tuition, i.e. a mixture of face-to-face group tutorials and online group tutorials (delivered through a synchronous video-conferencing tool). Learners and teachers can also get in contact via online asynchronous tools such as forums, wikis and blogs. Beginners' modules run for 11 months, while modules at other levels run for 8 months. During this time learners submit their assignments electronically via the university's own e-system, and receive electronic feedback from their teachers. Tools used to provide feedback include [Audacity](#) and [Jing](#).

1.2. The teachers

Teachers are expected to take active part in the production of materials to be used in the face-to-face and online tutorials. They typically adapt or create online teaching resources (consistent with the programme followed by the course book) to be used on the synchronous video-conferencing tool, and are also encouraged to upload and share their resources on [LORO](#) (*Languages Open Resources Online*), an online repository for storing, sharing and accessing language-teaching resources.

1.3. The collaborative writing and peer review project

The main purpose of the project was to give language teachers the opportunity to work collaboratively to produce and share new language-specific OERs, or

adapt the existing ones. They were encouraged to exploit a range of synchronous and asynchronous tools (synchronous video-conferencing tool, forum, and emails, **Audacity**, **Jing** and Power Point) both for communication purposes and for the creation or re-adaptation of the educational resources. The objective was to share and publish the resources produced by each group by uploading them on an open repository.

Quite early on in the project emphasis was put on the crucial role that peer review has in a collaborative work. Therefore, in the initial phase all project team members worked together in establishing the main rules of working collaboratively in an online environment and produced a 'Netiquette' for peer review.

In a second phase, participants were invited to form different groups and agree on a specific task depending on their common interests and areas of expertise, and on the choice of tool. At this stage, the forum became a lively platform in which useful information, ideas and comments were shared amongst all the participants. Thanks to its openness, participants could interact with members of other groups and ideas emerged easily.

During the production phase, different groups explored different working tools. For effective communication, members preferred emails and regular online conference meetings via synchronous video-conferencing tools (either Elluminate or Skype). The choice of tools used to create or adapt resources depended mainly on the type of resources the group meant to produce.

1.4. The Italian project

The group consisted of three teachers who had been involved in the delivery of the blended OU Italian Beginners' module L195 'Andante' for five years and Italian Intermediate module L150 'Vivace' for two years.

Each member was able to contribute a variety of relevant skills which she aspired to develop further. Anna Calvi had gathered experience as online language

teacher and writer of Italian and EAP materials for online, distance and face-to-face environments. Anna Motzo was an experienced face-to-face and online teacher of Italian who had coached opera singers, and whose areas of interest were pronunciation, production of learning material and e-learning. Sandra Silipo had worked for many years as a teacher of Italian (both face-to-face and online) as well as an author of Italian books, and was particularly interested in improving her online teaching skills and developing resources for the teaching of pronunciation.

2. Intended outcomes

This section describes the needs of online and distance language learners, the needs of learners of Italian regarding phonology and the specific intended outcomes of the Italian project.

2.1. The learners' needs

The materials produced by participants to the project were intended to address the specific needs of online and distance learners. Studying a language through a distance course offers learners the advantage of working at their own pace, but challenges are also present. The main challenge that learners face is limited access to face-to-face contact with their teacher and with proficient speakers of the language. This can negatively affect the development of speaking skills and, in particular, pronunciation. There is little time to work on learners' pronunciation during the tutorials, and once the tutorial is over, learners can no longer access a live model. In addition to this, not all learners attend tutorials, which are not compulsory. Particularly affected are learners who have a learning disability and need explicit explanations, a multi-sensory approach and more opportunities for practice.

2.2. Five challenging Italian sounds

An area which learners of Italian find particularly challenging is the

pronunciation of the phonemes [ʎ], [z], [s], [ʃ], and the double consonant ///. As can be seen in Table 1, these sounds are difficult to learn either because the sounds do not exist in the English language, or because they exist but are spelt in a different way.

Table 1. Difficulties faced by English speakers learning to pronounce [ʎ], [z], [s], [ʃ], and the double consonant ///

Phonemes	Difficulties
[ʎ] (spelt /gl/)	It does not exist in English (an approximation of it is the phoneme [lj] as in the English word 'million').
[z]	It exists both in Italian and in English, but in English is spelt /z/, while in Italian is spelt /s/.
[s]	It exists in English and is spelt /s/. In Italian spelling /s/ corresponds either to phoneme [z] or phoneme [s] (depending on the position in the word, on the phonemes that precede or follow it and also on regional variations).
[ʃ]	It exists in English but has a different spelling from the Italian (English /sh/, Italian /sci/, /sce/).
The double consonant sound ///	It does not exist in English

2.3. Intended outcomes of the Italian project

The goal was to produce resources which would help learners of Italian to improve their pronunciation of individual phonemes. The aim was therefore to design materials that would:

- help learners to recognize and pronounce the phonemes [ʎ], [z], [s], [ʃ], and the double consonant ///;
- provide them with easily accessible explanations and opportunities for practice.

Another goal was to develop professionally and improve support techniques. It was therefore hoped that as a result of the project the authors would be better able to:

- prepare learners for oral assignments;
- provide effective feedback on assignments;
- produce multimodal materials involving the use of sound and visuals (images and text);
- use **Jing** in combination with PowerPoint;
- work collaboratively with colleagues.

Overall, the authors felt that the project would help them become more autonomous not only in their effort to develop professionally but also in their ability to produce materials that suit their teaching styles and learners' needs.

Finally, the authors also wanted their project to have a wider impact, so they planned to produce resources that could:

- contribute to the delivery of the Italian beginners and intermediate modules;
- constitute an example of good practice and attract useful feedback;
- be made available to our OU colleagues and the wider teaching community.

3. Nuts and bolts

The authors started by discussing which tools would best help them to meet their goals. They agreed that the best way to produce multimodal materials incorporating sound and visuals would be to create a PowerPoint presentation and incorporate it in **Jing** before uploading it on **LORO**.

PowerPoint is a versatile tool normally used in both face-to-face and online tutorials. PP presentations can be easily uploaded on Elluminate and can also be easily shared with learners if they want to go over the language they have practised during a tutorial.

Jing is a screencasting computer program launched in 2007 by the TechSmith Corporation. The software takes a picture or video (image and sound) of the user's computer screen and uploads it to the Web. When the pictures or videos are uploaded to the web, **Jing** automatically creates a URL that can be shared with others. There are several reasons why **Jing** fitted in with the authors' objectives: it has a simple format, is user-friendly and is compatible with both Macintosh and Microsoft Windows. Users must sign up for an account before using the software, but registration is free, and there is no need to register and/or download the software in order to access the URL. All that learners need to do in order to access a recording is click on a link to open a web page. **Jing** recordings can be uploaded and shared on **LORO**, can be shared via their web link, and can be opened on Elluminate.

4. In practice: Three Italian tongue twisters

After agreeing which tools would be used, the project group members had to choose the content of the recordings: a short text (**Jing** recordings cannot be more than 5 minutes long) which could be used as a basis for pronunciation practice.

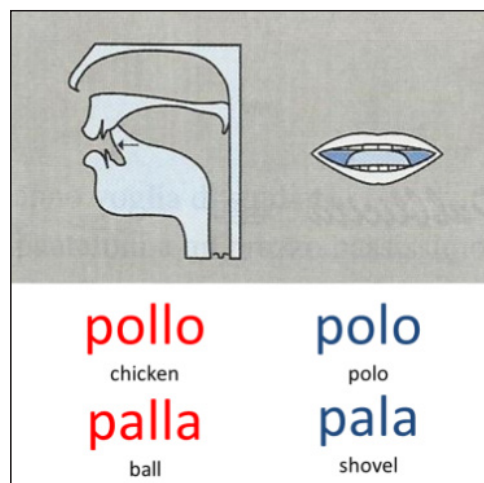
Tongue twisters were used for three reasons. First of all, in Italy tongue twisters are commonly used in primary schools to teach children specific spellings and the related sounds, and to help them to develop fluency. Tongue twisters also stimulate repetition which in turn helps learners to acquire confidence and develop fluency. Finally, tongue twisters are motivating as they bring an element of fun to the learning process, as well as an insight into Italian culture.

Three relevant tongue twisters were selected and each author created a PowerPoint presentation focussing on one of them. The presentation was then recorded on Jing, and the URLs of the material produced were posted on the project forum. This allowed the authors to edit their work thanks to valuable feedback and comments from their colleagues. Finally, the resources were uploaded on [LORO](#) so that they could be accessed by colleagues.

The three presentations ([La pronuncia della lettera ‘s’](#); [Double consonants in Italian: a tongue-twister](#); [Pronouncing the Italian sound ‘gl’](#)) are similarly structured, in order to provide consistency, but not identical, because they allow for variation depending on the sounds presented.

The first slide (or set of slides) provides a visual representation of how to move the mouth in order to produce the selected sound. A voice-over explains how to produce the selected sounds (see [Figure 1](#)).

Figure 1. How to articulate the sound



The second slide (or set of slides) provides words from the tongue twisters which contain the different selected sounds. A voice-over reads the words (see [Figure 2](#)).

Figure 2. Examples from the tongue twister



If necessary, the different sounds presented are compared in a new slide with both a visual and an auditory stimulus (see [Figure 3](#)).

Figure 3. Comparison of sounds



The whole tongue twister is introduced line by line, together with a visual aid (either drawing or picture) which illustrates and encapsulates the tongue twister through an image (see [Figure 4](#)).

Figure 4. The tongue twister



The final slide provides the translation in English (see [Figure 5](#)).

Figure 5. Translation of the tongue twister



Two members of the group used the resources in their tutorials. In one case the teacher presented them in a face-to-face tutorial (using PowerPoint) and then sent the URL of the Jing videos to the learners so that they could practise again on their own. In the other case, the activity was carried out online by uploading the Jing video on Elluminate. The learners were then encouraged to save it for practice and to record their voice using [Audacity](#) or another audio recording facility.

5. Conclusion

This collaborative experience can be evaluated in terms of the resources created, the process adopted and the professional skills and understandings gained by its participants.

5.1. The resources

The resources produced constitute a good example of OERs. From a pedagogical point of view, they have a clear objective and this is relevant to teachers teaching an Italian course to English speakers as they focus on difficulties that English speakers generally face.

They are free and easily accessible through the **LORO** repository and reusable by other teachers within and outside the university. Teachers can also choose to use them as templates when they design their own presentations and draw inspiration from them to develop similar resources to support learners of other languages. Although resources uploaded on **LORO** are not formally evaluated by module teams, users are encouraged to post their comments on them.

The resources were created under the Creative Commons Attribution Only Licence principle which means users are free to modify the original material, provided that the creator is acknowledged, and they can be modified because other users can access the PowerPoint presentation and use it as a template to create their own resource. In addition, other users can vary the way in which the resources are exploited to promote learning. For instance, both the PowerPoint slides and Jing videos can be made available to learners through a range of online environments and applications such as websites, online classrooms, tutor group forums, e-mails and e-feedback as well as face-to-face lessons.

Finally, the materials are also interactive in that the learner is encouraged to repeat after the teacher and, as they follow a multi-modal approach, they are likely to appeal to many learners and more effectively support language learning.

5.2. The collaborative process

In terms of the collaborative process, the experience has been successful. The authors have relied on peer review as a quality assurance tool and have been able to fully exploit their different competences and therefore have complemented each other in every stage of the process. Competences included the ability to teach pronunciation and use **Jing** as well as the ability to create resources, or to find and adapt openly licensed resources such as resource books, drawings and pictures.

The process was successful as participants were willing to join and to participate in an open and fruitful dialogue: each member contributed by providing ideas, support and mutual encouragement. The participants soon understood that, as individuals, they did not need a comprehensive ability to carry out all tasks since, as members of the group, they were able to motivate and complement each other and also give each other feedback. While this meant being open to criticism and willingness to negotiate, the final product was definitely superior to what they could have done on their own.

Working together has also highlighted how a single template can be successfully customised by the different teachers depending on their teaching styles, considerations of the learners' needs and the choice of pedagogical content. For example, teachers can use the template to focus mainly on the way in which a sound is made or spend more time helping learners to practise its use. Others may prefer a more balanced approach, involving explanations and practice.

5.3. Professional development

The project has allowed the authors to develop their ability to use technology for educational purposes. Adapting, designing and creating OERs requires a certain degree of familiarity with IT tools and a willingness to experiment with them. Although PowerPoint is a well-known piece of software, and **Jing** is user-friendly and mostly self-explanatory, it has taken some time, careful planning and several attempts to combine the two successfully.

The authors identified differences between methodologies used in different environments. When teaching pronunciation in a face-to-face situation, teachers rely heavily on visual clues (learners imitate the way teachers move their lips and mouth), and explanations can be tailored to learners' needs. When teaching pronunciation to distance learners through the means of online tools, explanations have to be concise and precise, in order to compensate the lack of visual clues.

Finally the project helped the authors to further extend their roles. Producing OERs with a peer group meant changing the way the authors saw themselves as teachers and gave them the opportunity to develop skills that are not traditionally associated with their role.

Useful links

Audacity software for recording and editing sounds: <http://audacity.sourceforge.net/>

LORO repository: <http://loro.open.ac.uk>

JING screen capture tool: <http://www.techsmith.com/jing.html>

La pronuncia della lettera 's': <http://loro.open.ac.uk/2934/>

Double consonants in Italian: a tongue-twister: <http://loro.open.ac.uk/2859/>

Pronouncing the Italian sound 'gl': <http://loro.open.ac.uk/3502/>