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## **Will Open Educational Resources underpin students' engagement in EFL class?: Investigating the feasibility of adopting OER in Japanese universities**

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### **Research Domains**

Digital University and new learning technologies (DU)

### **Abstract**

This study explores the feasibility of adopting Open Educational Resources (OER) in digital university EFL courses in Japan to fill in the paper-textbook shortcomings found in our previous research: the cost, unfinished or excess parts, and restricted content within the textbook. Despite the long recognition as a gateway to learning engagement and post-pandemic inclination to online learning, OER is not pervasive in higher education in Japan. We found from an online discussion and a questionnaire that OER was used positively in European digital universities, while not widespread in Asia due to insufficient funding, lacked human resources, and internet issues. Also observed was teachers' sincere interest to OER knowledge. This study suggests that faculty-level application of OER will improve when OER-related problems are clarified, and appropriate means come into practice.

### **Full paper**

Introduction

Materials play a significant role in English as a foreign language (EFL)

instruction, while their social attribute (Oliver, 2013) implies the possibility of a broader range of material adoption. Our previous research on the EFL materials suggests, besides positive findings, the problems of paid paper textbooks regarding their costs, unnecessary parts, and content. Based on these findings, the study focuses on Open Educational Resources (OER) as the means to fill in the shortcomings of the current textbook use. OER refers to "resources that reside in the public domain or have been released under a license that permits their free use by others" (Smith & Casserly, 2006). Despite their worldwide recognition and post-pandemic inclination to online learning in Japan, OER is not pervasive in Japanese higher education. This study explores the possibility of adopting OER in Japanese undergraduate EFL courses for active student engagement.

## OER Research

Integrating OER into EFL learning benefits teachers, students, researchers, and society. For instance, it advances their research career and reduces global inequalities because knowledge is a public good for all humanity (Azevedo et al., 2022). The role of OER is often discussed with critical lenses (Knox, 2013; Martín-Monje & Borthwick, 2021). While OER has long been recognised as a gateway to learning engagement, its cross-cultural aspect is pointed out (Jung & Lee, 2020), and its relationship with economically-orientated models of the university is questioned (Knox, 2013). For the students' perception, Fine and Read (2020) indicate that feelings of course connectivity, preference for low-cost education and online learning, and trust in faculty members enhance students' OER perceptions.

## OE in Japan

Japan's open education (OE) was primarily led by the national government and progressed within the lifelong learning framework, such as in the Open University of Japan (OUJ) (Yamada, 2013). For the institutional level movement, we see the prevalence of extracurricular advanced-level classes by Massive Open Online

Courses (MOOCS). However, these trends are aimed at learning outside formal education and have yet to become widespread in regular EFL curriculums, particularly at the individual level with university teachers. Yamada (2013) points out that the Japanese government, universities, and publishers lack the motivation to develop content accessible to the public, which is one significant hindrance.

## Methods

This study analysed the students' free comments from the two questionnaire surveys conducted in 2020 (n=94) and 2021 (n=32). In addition, in 2022, we conducted an online discussion and a questionnaire with informed consent for research purposes with a few university teachers from other countries.

## Findings and Discussion

2020 survey shows that most students welcomed the advantages of textbooks, but a few pointed out their costs, unfinished or wasted parts, and the restricted learning content within the textbook (Ida & Matsuoka, 2021; Matsuoka & Ida, 2021). Underpinned is the assumption that Japanese students are accustomed to using paper textbooks in learning from elementary to high school according to government policy and traditional norms. However, by 2021, they adapted to online classes, and more students desired to learn broader content beyond textbooks. Cozart (2021) cites "the cost savings, easy access, and relevant content" as the most prominent reason students prefer OER to traditional textbooks. OER improve access to materials and provide content in various formats, and importantly, they are not only for open education (Mishra, 2017). The point regarding content is particularly crucial because EFL learners need to learn to choose materials from a broader range of selections by themselves to become more global and autonomous.

We found in the discussion and the questionnaire that OER is used positively in the digital university environment. However, it is not widely used in Asian countries due to insufficient funding and human resources for maintaining and updating content and regional internet issues. Also found was that an individual teacher did not have enough knowledge but wanted to know more about OER. Discussion about OER problems ranged from the authors' sustainable motivation in creating content to copyright issues and examining the OER qualities.

## Conclusion

This study highlights the possibility of using OER in higher education in Japan, but the findings apply to higher education in many other countries. We have so far found that the country's culture and educational policy affect material use and OER adoption in higher education. At the same time, faculty-level OER adoption will improve when OER-related problems are clarified, and appropriate means come into practice. For prospects, practical and detailed OER use and student-level OER perception should also be investigated.

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