



# Open Educational Resources, a Win-win Situation for All?

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## Abstract

*Throughout the years, higher education instructors have adopted textbooks that would be used for a determined number of courses; in my experience, we use one textbook for two semesters, or the equivalent of one year. Students pay a significant amount of money for those textbooks, and personally, I feel obligated to use them in their totality, covering every chapter. However, are we really benefiting our students in doing so, when research has proved the student will learn in a natural order, no matter how we teach them? After a few semesters facing highly motivated students who were frustrated after not being able to understand the use of subjunctive in their 2<sup>nd</sup> semester of Spanish, as a department, we decided we needed to do what was best for the students. We started an OER (open educational resources) project. This paper is the result of our experience.*

**Keywords:** OER, open education, material development

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Background and context.

In higher education, textbooks have long occupied a central role in the learning process. Traditionally, higher education instructors have relied on these printed books as the primary source of knowledge dissemination. For decades, students have been required to invest substantial amounts of money in acquiring textbooks, often serving as the foundation for coursework in multiple semesters. The use of a single textbook for two consecutive semesters or, equivalently, an entire academic year, has been a common practice in language learning.

This practice, however, raises several crucial questions. Does the utilization of these textbooks genuinely benefit students? Is the cost, which is often a financial burden on students, justified by the educational gains derived from these textbooks? These questions have prompted educators to reassess the efficacy of this longstanding approach to pedagogy.

The cost of textbooks has consistently risen, adding to the already substantial expenses of college education. These expenses can be particularly daunting, especially for those from lower-income backgrounds, and may deter students from purchasing required materials, impacting their learning experience.

Despite this economic strain, the conventional belief has been that textbooks serve as a comprehensive resource for students. Instructors often feel compelled to utilize these textbooks in their entirety, especially when the price cost is so elevated. However, are we really benefiting our students by doing so? If we look in detail our textbooks, there is content in there that research has proved the student will not learn. Krashen's Natural Order Hypothesis states that language learners will get content following a natural order, no matter in what order or what we teach them.

Hence, an additional challenge emerges from the real-world experiences of educators. Instructors have encountered highly motivated students who, despite using the recommended textbooks, find themselves frustrated due to their inability to grasp certain concepts or skills. I have faced highly motivated students who were deeply frustrated after not being able to understand the use of subjunctive in their 2<sup>nd</sup> semester of Spanish. This anecdote illustrates the very real, practical challenges faced by instructors when traditional textbooks do not align with the needs and progress of their students. This brings to the forefront concerns about whether textbooks genuinely align with how students learn best.

Utah Tech University and its Spanish faculty reevaluated their approach to course materials. This reassessment led to the exploration of alternative strategies, including the adoption of Open Educational Resources (OERs).

## 2. Methodology.

### 2.1. Review of Course Learning Outcomes (CLOs).



Driven by our concern for our students, and by their frustration, we decided to take action. The situation demanded a thorough examination, encouraging us to analyze our first-year courses.

We decided to assess our CLOs to realistically determine if the alignment of these outcomes with the proficiency standards by ACTFL were adequate. Our CLOs aimed for our students achieving Novice-Mid proficiency by the conclusion of Span1010 and rising to Novice-High upon the successful completion of Span1020. In the end, we all agreed: our existing CLOs were indeed suitable for our courses, and the pursuit of proficiency standards appeared to be realistic.

So, if the CLOs were not the problem, the next natural step was to analyze our textbook.

## **2.2. Assessment of available materials and the decision-making process for OERs.**

The real turning point in our journey occurred as we examined the textbook that had been used in these courses. It was full of content that exceeded the linguistic capacity of our students. This discord between textbook content and student readiness was the reason behind our students' frustration.

In search of an alternative, we evaluated other textbooks. However, most textbooks we explored also presented this challenge. We were left puzzled by the insistence on introducing complex subjunctive structures in the second semester when our students were still mastering basic present tense.

This realization led to a significant shift within our Spanish faculty. We understood the need to adjust our course materials to better suit our students' language development stages.

At this point, Utah Tech University was shifting towards OERs, and I was developing a textbook for another course; so, we discussed what OERs were. These are educational materials that reside in the public domain or have been released under an open license, which permits free access, use, modification, and sharing. These materials encompass a broad spectrum, ranging from textbooks and lecture notes to multimedia content, simulations, and assessments. OERs are celebrated for their accessibility and affordability, offering students and educators a wide variety of resources without the constraints of traditional copyright restrictions.

## **2.3. Different commitment to OERs and Faculty buy-in.**

Incorporating OERs into a curriculum has different levels of commitment. Faculty can opt to adopt existing OERs, utilizing them as they are, with minimal modifications. They may also choose to adapt OERs, customizing the content to align with their teaching methods and course requirements. Lastly, faculty can embark on the creation of OERs from scratch, crafting tailored educational materials. Each approach offers a unique set of advantages and challenges, allowing educators to make deliberate choices based on their pedagogical goals and resources.

The role of faculty in endorsing and integrating OERs is fundamental. Faculty members are not merely adopters but curators of educational materials. Their active involvement in identifying suitable OERs, whether for adoption, adaptation, or creation, can drastically influence the trajectory of OER integration. Faculty buy-in is essential for the widespread adoption of OERs, as their expertise and advocacy can spearhead institutional efforts to promote open education.

So, the Spanish program faculty as a group searched for OERs that already existed for Beginning Spanish. To access OERs within our institution, we utilized Pressbooks, which serves as a repository, offering a user-friendly interface for creating, adapting, and publishing open textbooks and educational materials. We narrowed our focus to two available textbooks, [1] and [2], conducting a thorough examination of their contents.

## **2.3 Development of essential concepts, grammar, vocabulary, and cultural aspects.**

A critical aspect of course design lies in the development of content that not only aligns with CLOs but also resonates with the specific needs of students. In this context, the creation of a list encompassing essential functions, grammar points, vocabulary, and cultural aspects was a pivotal component in ensuring that students receive a tailored and enriching educational experience.

We embarked on this endeavor, pooling our expertise to compile a catalog that would be instrumental in shaping our curriculum. However, this endeavor presented a unique challenge: the envisioned list seemed to surpass the intended proficiency levels outlined in the CLOs. A moment of reflection ensued, leading to a collective decision to embrace the comprehensive list, recognizing it as the blueprint for our ideal 1<sup>st</sup>-year-Spanish.

To bridge the gap between this comprehensive list and the intended learning outcomes, we color-coded each element based on its alignment with the selected OER textbooks. This meticulous process involved cross-listing the list with the CLOs, ensuring that every element was deliberately connected to the proficiency goals. This step was integral in tailoring the materials to the unique needs and proficiency levels of the students, as the color coding allowed for a clear understanding of which concepts and resources were readily available in the chosen OER textbooks.

By aligning our curated list with the available OER materials, we ensured that the course materials resonated with the students' proficiency levels. The act of color-coding provided a practical guide for



instructors, allowing them to streamline their teaching approach, focusing on the elements that were readily available while supplementing areas where OER resources were lacking.

#### **2.4. Details of the adaptation and expansion process.**

For Span1010, we decided to adopt the existing OERs we analyzed, recognizing their value. However, understanding the need for customization and the alignment of content with the comprehensive list of essential content, we also decided to adapt them. This involved enhancing the OERs with supplementary materials tailored to the students' needs. These materials were brought to the classroom to amplify the learning and exposure to Spanish.

For Span1020, in contrast, we chose to create OERs from scratch. Eventhough the selected OERs were providing content for this course, the fact that language teaching is usually based on recycling and spiraling, made it hard to make a clear distinction between what faculty in 1010 would use, and what I could solely use for 1020. The fact that 2 different professors were teaching 1010, and only I would be teaching 1020 facilitated this decision. I carefully design course materials that specifically met the proficiency levels and learning objectives of Span1020. Simultaneously, I ventured into the realm of adaptation, leveraging available resources from the internet. The integration of external resources, such as online articles, videos, and interactive activities, allowed for a dynamic and comprehensive learning experience. These resources were selectively curated and fine-tuned to align seamlessly with the course's learning outcomes.

Link to Span1020 OER - <https://uen.pressbooks.pub/span1020/>

The integration of OERs and internet-sourced materials was not only cost-effective but also tailored to the needs of the students. It exemplified the potential of open education, where the boundaries of traditional textbooks are transcended to offer a rich and diverse learning experience. The process underlines the adaptability of educators in embracing a blend of curated OERs and supplementary internet resources, championing a modern approach to Spanish language education.

### **3. Lessons Learned and Future of the Project.**

#### **3.1. Challenges and Areas for Improvement**

One notable challenge was the involvement of multiple professors. While this collaborative approach held immense potential, it also posed the difficulty of creating a cohesive, "traditional looking" textbook. In the case of Span1010, this challenge was more pronounced. The Span1020 course produced a more cohesive and connected textbook, mirroring the needs of our students, since I was the sole instructor. This experience underscores the importance of synchronized collaboration and offers lessons for future multi-professor projects.

#### **3.2. What Could Have Been Done Differently**

In retrospect, we recognize that more time for analysis, discussion, and workload division among faculty would have been beneficial. Our journey was marked by the spirit of experimentation, as we ventured into uncharted territories with OERs. This "try-out" semester approach was undoubtedly a learning experience, yet it also revealed the advantages of a more meticulous and considered planning phase. Further, we aim to embrace this learning by allocating time for thorough deliberation and precise distribution of responsibilities among the faculty, promoting a more cohesive and coordinated curriculum development process.

#### **3.3. Future Plans**

The OER project is far from a static endeavor; it'll evolve after each semester. We have ambitious plans to enhance its effectiveness. A key element is a focus on our students' experiences. We will conduct surveys to gather feedback and insights, which will inform our continuous improvement efforts. Student input will be instrumental in refining our OER materials.

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