

# 4 Embedding OERs for the development of information literacy in the foreign language classroom

Odette Gabaudan<sup>1</sup> and Susanna Nocchi<sup>2</sup>

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## Abstract

Despite a rapid growth of Open Educational Resource (OER) availability, Thoms and Thoms (2014) note that few empirical studies examine the impact of OERs on foreign language learning and teaching. This paper presents an action research study investigating the embedding of selected components of DigiLanguages, an OER for Digital Literacies (DLs) for Foreign Languages (FL) within a Bachelor of Arts (BA) in International Business and Languages at the Technological University Dublin. Digilanguages.ie is an open portal developed collaboratively by six tertiary education institutions in Ireland. Digital literacies for FL learning and teaching is a key strand in this resource. The study involved two groups of students, one majoring in French and one in Italian. One of the aims of the study was to pilot the portal and identify affordances and constraints of introducing and adapting this OER to the individual FL classroom. Of equal importance was to analyse the potential of the OER to introduce and/or change pedagogical practices in an area that remains largely under investigated, namely DLs for foreign language learning. The study informs future steps in how to use a particular OER to embed units of DLs into FL courses. It also provides insights on developing a new set of professional practices among language teachers.

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1. Technological University Dublin, Dublin, Ireland; odette.gabaudan@dit.ie; <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4926-8959>

2. Technological University Dublin, Dublin, Ireland; susanna.nocchi@dit.ie; <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1389-8035>

**How to cite this chapter:** Gabaudan, O., & Nocchi, S. (2019). Embedding OERs for the development of information literacy in the foreign language classroom. In A. Comas-Quinn, A. Beaven & B. Sawhill (Eds), *New case studies of openness in and beyond the language classroom* (pp. 49-63). Research-publishing.net. <https://doi.org/10.14705/rpnet.2019.37.966>

**Keywords:** OER, OEP, digital literacies, foreign language learning, French as FL, Italian as FL.

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## 1. Context of the project

Digital technologies in the classroom have long been advocated as an important tool for education both at European ([European Commission, 2013](#)) and national level ([Irish Department of Education and Skills, 2015](#), p. 5; [National Forum, 2015](#), p. iii). The diffusion of technologies and their associated DLs is leading us to develop new pedagogies aimed at supporting learners acquiring what is now considered an essential component of life skills ([Karpati, 2011](#)).

As DLs are socially, historically, and culturally situated practices, digital fluency is also a core element of FL teaching and learning. With this in mind, the authors designed an action research study aimed to assess the embedding of FL activities for the development of DLs in the FL classroom. The study is anchored in [Dudeny, Hockly, and Pegrum's \(2014\)](#) framework of DLs where DLs are defined as “the individual and social skills needed to effectively interpret, manage, share and create meaning in the growing range of digital communication channels” (p. 2).

The [Dudeny et al. \(2014\)](#) framework comprises different DLs, grouped into four main foci: language, information, connections, and redesign. This study is designed around the information focus, which comprises four literacies: tagging, search, information, and filtering. The FL activities were drawn from DigiLanguages, a multilingual portal offering flexible online support for FL teachers and learners in three broad areas, one being DLs for language development.

The study took place at one of the institutions involved in the DigiLanguages project, Technological University Dublin, where the authors lecture, respectively, in French and in Italian.

## 2. Intended outcomes

As members of the team that developed the portal, the authors' interests were twofold and focussed on the OER both as a tool for teaching and learning and as a trigger to change teachers' educational practices. The authors recognised in their context issues similar to those highlighted by other researchers in the field (Masterman & Wild, 2011; Seaman & Seaman, 2017), namely that the level of awareness and the overall adoption of OERs for FL teaching and learning among colleagues was still rather low. Also, it was noted that OER adoption did not always transfer to Open Educational Practice (OEP). Therefore, this paper focusses on the two teachers' uses of the OER in terms of professional development and its potential to change OEP by highlighting the portal's affordances and constraints in view of its future introduction to the institution's FL courses and in colleagues' OEPs.

## 3. Nuts and bolts

This action research study took place during the 2017/2018 academic year and was conducted using foreign language activities offered on the online portal DigiLanguages.

### 3.1. The DigiLanguages project

The DigiLanguages portal was the result of a national project funded by the Irish National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education. The project was carried out by representatives of six Irish higher education institutions and was completed in August 2017. The DigiLanguages portal offers online resources in six languages (English, French, German, Irish, Italian, and Spanish) and activities in three broad areas:

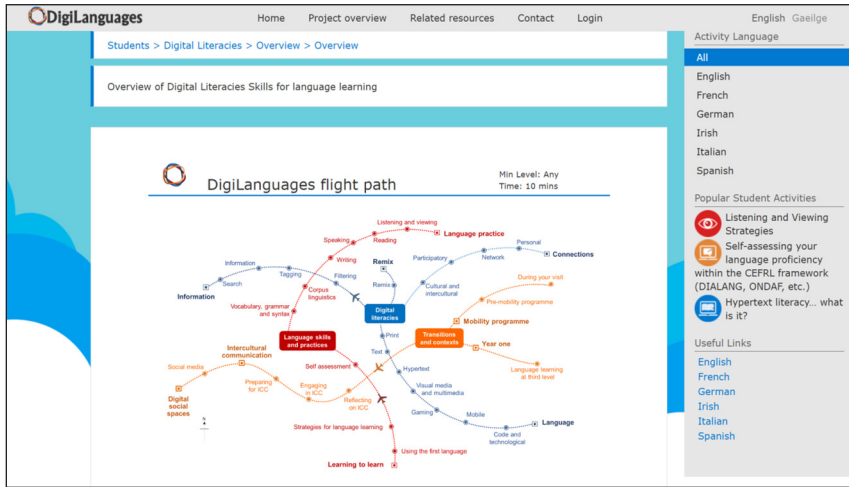
- DL for FL development;
- language learning strategies and practices; and

- transitions to third level language learning environments.

Each area offers materials with activities for students, activities for teachers with their students, and activities for teachers' Continuous Professional Development (CPD).

The study focussed on DLs for FL development, organised in the DigiLanguages portal following Dudeney et al.'s (2014, p. 6) DLs framework. The subsets of DLs can be seen below (dots on the blue lines, Figure 1).

Figure 1. DigiLanguages portal map



DigiLanguages is freely available and scalable for use. Its contents and activities afford integration into many higher education FL programmes and all materials available on the site use a Creative Commons licence.

### 3.2. Methodology

The research study was designed to test and evaluate the integration of tasks drawn from the portal by one teacher of Italian as an FL and one teacher of

French as an FL within their respective groups of undergraduate students of Business with Italian or with French. The students' language proficiencies varied between levels B1+ and B2+ on the Common European Framework of Reference for languages (CEFR, 2001) and the language tasks were carried out as part of the students' final year course in current affairs. This course aims to develop students' understanding and critical appraisal of current affairs in the countries of their chosen foreign language. While technologically-mediated information literacy is not an explicit learning outcome of the course, it is clearly of particular relevance in a current affairs course.

The following subsections offer an outline of the teachers' approaches by presenting one of the tasks on the portal.

### 3.2.1. *Course set up*

Each task on the portal is introduced and fully developed in English. It usually contains hyperlinks to videos and websites and generally provides access to additional material. Each language task is also localised for the five other languages.

Both teachers used all available Teacher CPD materials to familiarise themselves with the topic before drawing on relevant DigiLanguages activities for teachers to use with their students. The activities informed the teachers' own lesson plans but in a number of cases these had to be supplemented by further material.

The French teacher worked with her group of seven students for a total of eight hours, and the Italian teacher worked for six hours with a group of six students. The two teachers decided to dedicate three weeks to the theme, with two to three teaching hours per week. Each lesson hour was supplemented by one or two hours of independent learning.


As one of the aims of the research was to explore how individual teachers use and take ownership of an OER, it was decided not to agree on a specific pedagogical approach, nor to agree on a selection of tasks on offer on the portal. Both teachers

shared their experiences only at the end of the three weeks so as not to influence each other. With a view to help the reader visualise the pedagogical design of the portal, the following section offers an example of one of the language tasks chosen by the two teachers for use in their FL class.

### 3.2.2. The search literacy task

The search literacy task (see [Figure 2](#)) is designed to make students aware of how search engines work and how different search engines can filter and offer different results to different individuals. Often FL students do not use country-specific search engines or, if they do, they are not always aware of the cultural, social, political, and/or linguistic nuances differentiating the results that they find. See below the task description in English, as it appears on the teacher tab on DigiLanguages.

Figure 2. Let's search! Search literacy task



## Let's search!

Min Level: A2  
Time: 45 mins

This activity aims to raise students' awareness of how search engines filter results for individuals, and how this can impact on one's studies/work. Before attempting this activity, you may want to point students to the [Search literacy... what is it?](#) page or use some of the language specific content to consolidate their vocabulary and written and aural comprehension skills.

### Learning outcomes

On completion of this activity, students will be able to

- Understand the limitations and personal filtering of search engines
- Narrow down and refine search results

### Technology requirements

- Internet-enabled computer connected to a data projector
- Internet-enabled student computers or mobile devices (one per student or student pair)
- Search engines ([Google](#), [Bing](#), [Yahoo](#), etc.)
- [Microsoft Snipping Tool](#) or any other screenshot capturing tool

### Procedure

#### Before the class

1. Before the class, select a search term (word or phrase) that relates to the topic you are working on with your students;
2. Conduct several searches using the same search term
  1. A few minutes apart;
  2. On different devices;
  3. Using different search engines (e.g., Google, Bing, Yahoo, etc.) or regional versions of the same search engine (e.g. Google France/Canada/Belgique, etc., Google Deutschland/Austria/Switzerland, etc.).
3. Make screenshots of the first page of results each time and save them.
4. Prepare a handout or PowerPoint presentation to show in class.
5. Prepare a Google Form for students to fill in in class (Step 2 below), with 3 text boxes for entering search terms (optional).

**In class**

1. Introduce the subject of the search (for example: finding [student accommodation](#) in their target country).
2. Ask students to write down 3 search terms, in their target language, relating to the selected topic. This can be done on a piece of paper or by filling in the Google form that you have prepared in advance of the class. Students can work individually or in pairs.
3. Read or display the results to the class and discuss the following questions:
  1. What do the chosen search terms tell you about the authors?
  2. What kind of information are they looking for?
  3. What types of results can one expect to get?
4. Agree with the whole class on one search term in the target language (for example 'student accommodation').
5. Ask students to open their regular search engine and to search for the term agreed in Step 4.
6. Ask students to capture a screenshot of their results using [Windows Snipping Tool](#) or any other screen capture tool.
7. Ask students to repeat Steps 5 and 6 with different search engines (for example [Google UK](#), [Google Ireland](#)).
8. Ask students to compare and discuss the results of their search (Step 7).
9. Ask students to do the same search using the following symbols: +, -, "...". (e.g., *+student accommodation, +student accommodation, -student accommodation, "student accommodation"*).
10. Ask students to compare and discuss the different results.

**After class**

Ask students to conduct the same search at home or a new one using a term or terms agreed upon by the class. Students could bring a printout or a screenshot of the first page of search results to class the next day. Let them share their results and compare. What might they say about each student? You may want to point them to [Eli Pariser's Ted's talk: Beware online "filter bubbles"](#):



Each group of students worked on the Italian or French version of the Let's search! task, which each teacher adapted for two main reasons. Firstly, the task outlined in the portal requires student access to a computer. Students in both French and Italian had no access to computer labs. As a result, teachers asked them to work on their personal mobile devices and on paper. Secondly, the task described in the portal is very detailed thereby providing users with alternative options that can be adapted to different contexts. Each teacher prepared her own document with all necessary lesson materials for her class. An outline of how each teacher took ownership of the various activities is provided in the next section.

3.2.3. *The Let's search! task – French*

Figure 3. Localisation of Let's search! for French

<b>French</b>	German	Irish	Italian
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Quelques idées de sujets de recherche pour la classe de français

Pour chacun des sujets ci-dessous (et pour d'autres), vous pouvez préparer des captures de la première page de résultats pour un ou plusieurs mots-clés donnés par un ou plusieurs moteurs de recherche.

- Trouver un logement étudiant à l'étranger (en lien avec l'activité [Student Accommodation](#))
- Données personnelles
- Changement climatique
- Système éducatif

Moteurs de recherche en français

- [Google France](#)
- [Google Belgique](#)
- [Google Canada](#)
- [Google Suisse](#)
- [Yahoo France](#)

Moteurs de recherche: comment ça marche?

Si vous voulez indiquer à vos étudiants quelques ressources en français, essayez les liens ci-dessous:

- [Comment ça marche: Rechercher sur Internet](#)
- [Conseils pour faire une recherche sur Internet \(Le Monde\)](#)
- [Faire une recherche sur Internet \(Open Classrooms\)](#)

As students were not familiar with Boolean operators and did not appear to use a systematic approach to carrying out searches, the French teacher adapted the Let's search! task (see [Figure 3](#) above) as follows:

- added a pre-discussion task on the students' general approach to carrying out a search and assessing reliable sources of information;
- added a reading activity to familiarise students with concepts and terminology;
- before class, the teacher completed a grid with a number of searches relating to the filter bubble and fake news using different Boolean



operators, different browsers, and different country-specific search engines. During class, students were asked to compare and contrast search results before carrying out their own search; and

- after class, students were asked to write a short essay on the topic.

### 3.2.4. *The Let's search! task – Italian*

Figure 4. Localisation of Let's search! for Italian

French German Irish **Italian**

#### Alcuni argomenti per l'attività di ricerca in italiano

Per ciascuno degli argomenti seguenti potete salvare la prima schermata dei risultati (per una o più parole chiave e per uno o più motori di ricerca):

- L'alloggio per gli studenti
- Il sistema educativo italiano
- Le tradizioni regionali italiane

**Da vedere:**

Come funzionano i motori di ricerca? Guarda il video di [PCabc.it](#):



**Da leggere:**

Piccola guida scritta: [Come fare ricerche online](#)

**Alcuni motori di ricerca italiani:**

- [Google Italia](#)
- [Yahoo Italia](#)
- [Virgilio](#) (poco usato ormai)

**Author for Italian contents:** Valentina Rizzo

The students of Italian spent two hours on the Let's search! task. The Italian teacher found the guidelines for task preparation and the task outline useful. However, she decided not to follow them in detail, in order to fully adapt the task to suit her group's needs and interests (see **Figure 4** above). This was done by adding:

- a general warm-up discussion with students on their experience with search engines;
- pair-work on the 'filter bubble', followed by group discussion;
- a focus on different lexical items in Italian;
- more up-to-date material; and
- a post-task activity requesting students to read links sent to them and prepare for a discussion for the following week on the 'filter bubble' and the impact of algorithms on our life.

### **3.3. Data collection and analysis**

The data for the study were collected before, during, and after the sessions. Data gathered from the teachers consisted of the teachers' own self-reflective diary, which recorded their experience in terms of choice of FL activities, their adaptation, and implementation. Each teacher reflected on the use of the OER with a view to highlighting its constraints and opportunities in the context of teaching, learning, and changing OEPs.

Both teachers used three sections of the portal, two of which were the search literacy and information literacy sections. The French teacher also drew on visual literacy while the Italian teacher chose to work with filtering literacy. The teachers' reflections on their experience with the tasks were broadly similar and the diaries were investigated adapting the Achieve OER rubrics as follows (<https://achieve.org/publications/achieve-oer-rubrics>).

### 3.3.1. *Degree of alignment of the selected DigiLanguages tasks to the course objectives*

The constructive alignment (Biggs, 1996) between the selected tasks on the portal and the course learning outcomes was strong. Each of the tasks includes a general aim, specific learning outcomes, a procedure, and a number of accompanying resources in each language, which aligns with the blueprint for courses, adopted by the two teachers' institution. This eases the process of taking ownership of the OERs. However, both teachers found that the amount of time and effort required to familiarise oneself with the portal's proposed material, structure, and pathways should not be underestimated.

### 3.3.2. *Assurance of accessibility*

Here we discuss three different levels of accessibility:

- The *materials* did generally not need to be accessed on the portal during class time. When Internet access was required, teachers used the main console or students were asked to use their own devices.
- The *portal's pathways* to the materials did not always appear to be logical. While Dudeney et al.'s (2014) framework provides for a well-structured organisation of DLs, the boundaries between one subset of DLs and another are often pervious and the portal offers a variety of pathways that, despite providing the experienced teacher with a rich choice, may be confusing to a less experienced one. This resulted in one of the teachers missing out on what could have been a relevant activity in the context of information literacy (e.g. an infographics activity placed only under visual literacy and not also under information literacy) or stumbling upon an activity too late in the teaching sequence (e.g. a relevant self-evaluation on digital dependency that could serve as an introductory activity).
- The portal's *accessibility to new contributors* is problematic, as only those who were directly involved with the development of the portal

have access to editing its component parts. Ongoing contributions from a broad range of users are currently not feasible, thereby limiting the potential for valuable additions to the portal and raising sustainability concerns.

### 3.3.3. *Quality of the explanation of the subject matter*

The portal is clearly laid out and the different areas of DLs, with their subsets, are well explained with supporting examples and videos. The CPD sections provide a useful introduction to each of the DLs. The learning outcomes and procedures for the tasks are clearly outlined, despite, at times, either needing some adaptation to meet the particular teaching and learning contexts, or requiring trialling once to fully comprehend the scope of the suggested tasks (e.g. Let's search! activity).

### 3.3.4. *Utility of the proposed materials designed to support teaching*

The materials in English provided a valuable introduction and overview of the subject matter. The teachers used them only for their own information, mostly due to the fact that they are in English.

The resources made available in the FL tabs for Italian and French were not always reliable in terms of quality and relevance. Some were already outdated, an obsolescence difficult to avoid in the context of the rapidly changing nature of this type of material. In addition, some links are broken and some FL tasks are not fully developed. Such glitches were easily overcome by an experienced teacher, but may be more challenging for inexperienced teachers or teachers whose familiarity with DLs is generally very low.

### 3.3.5. *Quality of assessment*

The portal does not offer explicit suggestions for assessments. However, task learning outcomes and procedures are generally laid out according to a

constructivist view of learning; therefore learners create meaning as they engage with the proposed tasks (Biggs, 1996). In order to successfully carry out the task, following a detailed procedure, students came to understand the issues at stake. The groups being small, high interaction between students themselves and between students and teachers quickly revealed any gaps that needed to be addressed.

### 3.3.6. *Quality of technological interactivity*

Course design limited technological interactivity as most interactions took place during class time. Preparation of tasks outside of class did not require peer interaction. While the absence of prescribed peer to peer online interaction limits the open pedagogy dimension of this study, teachers found it preferable to acquaint themselves with open pedagogical practices in an incremental manner, thus opting to leverage the potential of online peer collaboration in a subsequent phase of the study.

### 3.3.7. *Quality of instructional and practice tasks*

The tasks were found to be a very useful means of enhancing FL teachers' practice. For the two teachers who undertook this study, much of their motivation is derived from their direct involvement in the design of the OER and their interest in carrying out research based on the portal.

Teachers who did not participate in the project may not have the same level of interest and determination to invest the time required to use the resource.

### 3.3.8. *Opportunities for deeper learning*

The proposed tasks encouraged students to analyse and link new practices and concepts to their familiar use of online and social media. Further, the tasks supported students' reflections on the personal significance of DLs in their language learning. The clearly laid out learning outcomes were key in supporting the teachers in adopting new practices with their learners.

## 4. Conclusion

The DigiLanguages OER had a definite positive impact on the teachers' critical reflection in relation to pedagogical practices. Through its development and use, the two teachers became aware of the relevance of embedding DLs in their teaching practice. Also, the portal's rich and accessible material and its potential for fostering deep learning served as an invaluable source of inspiration to implement innovation and changes in their students' learning activities.

Issues related to the time needed to familiarise oneself with the material, to adapt it to one's needs and context, and to deal with the glitches in some of the tasks, however, did not lead to a clear development path for OEP. These issues, often identified in the field (Pegler, 2010; Thoms & Thoms, 2014), might hinder less motivated or more time constrained colleagues who approach the OER. Also, interaction with the resource alone may not be sufficient to encourage colleagues to embed DLs in their practices. This points to the need for teachers' CPD and support for any future implementation. For instance, guidance on integration of DLs within given curricula could usefully be provided at departmental level.

As the DigiLanguages project originated in Ireland, English is the primary language within the portal, and descriptions of DLs as well as of FL tasks are in English, thus restricting its usage for colleagues who understand English.

Finally, the issue of sustainability needs consideration. For security and quality assurance reasons, the portal's updating infrastructure is still a closed system and users are unable to contribute or amend its content. Nevertheless, the portal remains an invaluable resource for any foreign language teacher in higher education institutions.

## Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the Irish National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education for funding the DigiLanguages project.

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Published by Research-publishing.net, a not-for-profit association  
Voillans, France, info@research-publishing.net

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**New case studies of openness in and beyond the language classroom**  
**Edited by Anna Comas-Quinn, Ana Beaven, and Barbara Sawhill**

**Publication date:** 2019/07/26

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Cover design by © Raphaël Savina (raphael@savina.net)

ISBN13: 978-2-490057-51-1 (Ebook, PDF, colour)  
ISBN13: 978-2-490057-52-8 (Ebook, EPUB, colour)  
ISBN13: 978-2-490057-50-4 (Paperback - Print on demand, black and white)  
Print on demand technology is a high-quality, innovative and ecological printing method; with which the book is never 'out of stock' or 'out of print'.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data.  
A cataloguing record for this book is available from the British Library.

**Legal deposit, UK:** British Library.  
**Legal deposit, France:** Bibliothèque Nationale de France - Dépôt légal: juillet 2019.