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## Framing the Role of English in OER from a Social Justice Perspective: A Critical Lens on the (Dis)empowerment of Non-English Speaking Communities

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**Abstract:** Open Educational Resources (OER) have received considerable attention for their potential to provide equitable access to education for all. However, OER creation, use, and adoption among learners, practitioners, and educational circles have remained low. One significant factor leading to this low engagement arises from the language of instruction employed in OER, notably English. Drawing on Hodgkinson-Williams and Trotter's (2018) conceptual framework, this study examines the role of English in knowledge dissemination through OER and discusses three language-related concerns from a social justice perspective: 1) linguistic complexity in OER, 2) translation as a method of OER adaptation, and 3) lack of OER development in local languages. The paper concludes with several recommendations for practice, pedagogy, and policy in OER development.

**Keywords:** English, open educational resources, social justice, translation, linguistic complexity

### Introduction

Global initiatives have pursued ways of promoting access to educational materials across the world (e.g., OECD, 2015; UNESCO, 2019). Open Educational Resources (OER) have been viewed as an instrumental medium to distribute high-quality educational resources and improve access to learning opportunities, especially for those disadvantaged who are deprived of quality education for various reasons (Bliss et al., 2013; Cape Town Declaration, 2007; Willems & Bossu, 2012). Since their emergence at UNESCO's 2002 Forum on the Impact of Open Courseware for Higher Education in Developing Countries, OER has garnered considerable attention in educational contexts (Bozkurt et al., 2019; Hilton, 2020; Otto, 2019; Zawacki-Richter et al., 2020). In line with the increasing interest in OER, their affordances have been extensively documented in the literature as reduced educational costs, increased knowledge exchange, broadened access to education, and accessibility to materials (e.g., Bossu et al., 2012; Bozkurt et al., 2019; Kanwar et al., 2010; McGreal 2017; Otto, 2019). Despite the increasing adoption of OER for their potential to share knowledge freely for the benefit of all, it is hard to claim that OER have fulfilled their mission to ensure educational equity in the globe (Bozkurt et al., 2019; Ehlers, 2011; Pulker & Kukulska-Hulme, 2020). Various barriers diminishing the expected adoption of OER in educational contexts have been identified such as language, contextualization, sustainability, quality, technical infrastructure, awareness, policy issues, and lack of training (Atkins et al., 2007; Belikov & Bodily, 2016; Bozkurt et al., 2019; Bossu et al., 2012; de Hart et al., 2015; Willems & Bossu, 2012).

Although each of the mentioned barriers in OER use deserves meticulous attention, this article focused on the language of instruction employed in most OER, framing it as an inhibiting factor to OER



engagement, especially in non-English speaking contexts. In parallel to its pivotal role as a global language connecting people in the world, English has become the predominant medium of language in numerous OER and Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs). For example, Adam (2019) has recently reported that more than half of the current 11,400 MOOCs in the world are produced in English. In a similar vein, Cobo (2013) searched eight queries about OER in English, Spanish, and Portuguese in two academic journal databases (Web of Knowledge and Scopus), one video-sharing website (YouTube), and one document-sharing website (Scribd). His results indicate “a growing language gap between the number of questions about OER retrieved in English and its equivalent in Spanish and Portuguese” (p. 121).

The mentioned predominance of English may lessen the educational opportunities for non-English speakers and non-native speakers of English by increasing cultural epistemic injustices between English and other languages and cultures. Although previous research has pointed out the relationship between open education initiatives and social justice (e.g., Cox et al., 2020; Lambert, 2018; Willems & Bossu, 2012), there appears to be a scarcity of studies extensively exploring the predominance of English in OER and its social justice implications. Therefore, through a critical examination, the purpose of this article is to examine the role of English in knowledge dissemination and (dis)empowerment of the non-English speakers and non-native speakers of English. Drawing on Hodgkinson-Williams and Trotter’s (2018) conceptual framework, which builds on Fraser’s (2005) social justice model, this study discusses the overreliance on English in OER as an inhibiting factor that may lower the opportunities for educational rights of the disadvantaged groups and inadvertently widen the educational gap. In addition, the present study foregrounds three language-related concerns from a social justice perspective 1) linguistic complexity in OER, 2) translation as a method of OER adaptation, and 3) lack of OER development in local languages and offers suggestions about how to address these concerns.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. First, openness as a term is described, and affordances and challenges of OER are explored. Next, language, particularly English, used in OER, is examined with a critical lens. And three language-related concerns —linguistic complexity in OER, translation as a method of OER adaptation, and lack of OER development in local languages— are discussed from a social justice perspective. Lastly, the paper concludes with recommendations for policy and pedagogy in OER development.

## Background

In this section, the term openness is described, and related literature on OER is discussed in terms of its affordances and challenges. Next, English, as a language of instruction in OER, is examined as a barrier in OER development and inclusiveness. The section concludes with the conceptual framework guiding the study.

### What is Openness?

Open education, in its most basic sense, is understood as enabling open access to education for the benefit of all. However, it has been an evolving concept taking various definitions and interpretations over time such as ‘affordable, freedom to use, free cost, justice, transparency, and collaboration’ (Baker, 2017; Bozkurt et al., 2019; Downes, 2007; Weller et al., 2018; Wiley, 2010; Zawacki-Richter, 2020). Although open education has a long history dating back to the Middle Ages (Weller, 2020), much of the open education practices have manifested themselves more visibly since the inception of the OER movement and the proliferation of the internet and communication technologies (Stracke, 2020; Weller et al., 2018). The availability and accessibility of resources (e.g., books, videos) are regarded as the two chief properties of openness (Baker, 2017). In addition to these properties, the openness of resources has been associated with carrying specific usage rights granted by copyright licenses (e.g., Creative Commons), allowing content creators to provide permissions for their resources. These usage rights are known as 5Rs of reusing, revising, remixing, redistributing, and retaining (Wiley, 2010; 2014). Although

other typologies of OER different than the usage rights framework of Wiley have appeared to date in parallel to evolving conception of OER over time (e.g., Butcher & Moore, 2015; Conole, 2015; Tuomi, 2013), the discussion of these frameworks is beyond the scope of this paper.

An open resource licensed to grant permission to access, reuse, and redistribute a work with few or no restrictions is ideal (Baker, 2017; McGreal, 2017). The licenses are generally granted based on the 5Rs mentioned above (UBC Open Case Studies, n.d.). Reusing provides the right to use the content in various ways such as in a class, on a website. Revising enables users to adapt, modify, or change the existing content such as translating the content into another language. Remixing provides the right to mix the content with other materials such as incorporating the text with images and videos to create something new. Redistributing allows users to share copies of the original content, revisions, or remixes with others. Retaining means creating, possessing, and controlling copies of the content such as downloading, copying, and managing. One of the most widely used licensing work is provided by Creative Commons presenting simple and transparent copyright licenses that producers can assign to their work. The types of permissions given to a user of the licensed item vary on the type of license the creator assigns to their work (see Creative Commons and UBC Open Case Studies for further details).

The term open has been found to co-occur in different but interrelated concepts/constructs such as open education, open learning, open educational resources, and open educational practices (Bozkurt et al., 2019). For example, "OEP is a multidimensional construct including, but not limited to, OER creation, use and adoption, open scholarship, open pedagogy, and learning" (Bozkurt et al., 2019, p. 79). Although open education encompasses various constructs as noted above, this paper focuses on OER as an open education practice.

### **Open Educational Resources (OER)**

Open Educational Resources (OER) as a term have been introduced by UNESCO as "teaching, learning, or research materials that are in the public domain or released with an intellectual property license that allows for free use, adaptation, and distribution" (UNESCO, 2002, para. 2). Since its inception, the OER movement has grown increasingly with new declarations and initiatives such as the 2007 Cape Town Open Education Declaration and the 2011 Commonwealth of Learning and UNESCO Guidelines on Open Educational Resources in Higher Education (UNESCO & COL, 2011). Additionally, the UNESCO Paris Declaration of 2012 showed support for OER development (UNESCO, 2012). In parallel to its recognition and evolution in the world, varying definitions of OER have been proposed so far in the literature, but one of the widely recognized definitions of OER is provided by UNESCO and the Commonwealth of Learning (2011) as "teaching, learning, and research materials in any medium that reside in the public domain and have been released under an open license that permits access, use, repurposing, reuse, and redistribution by others with no or limited restrictions" (p. v). This definition is adopted in the present study.

Since the early 2000s, there has been a growing supply of OER. The Massachusetts Institute of Technology's (MIT) Open Courseware (OCW) initiative has been the initial precursor for the evolution of the OER movement. Other well-known OER collections such as California State University's MERLOT, Open University's OpenLearn, and OER Commons contributed to the provision of open content universally. A few OER initiatives have also emerged in the developing world such as "in Sakshat in India, the China Open Resources for Education initiative, the OER UCT (University of Cape Town) project in South Africa, and the Vietnam Open Courseware initiative" (Kanwar et al., 2010, p. 68). In parallel to the developments in the spread of the Internet and communication technologies, the recent decade has witnessed many Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), a type of OER, that offer courses appealing to the needs of the new generations through platforms such as Coursera, EdX, Khan Academy, and so on.

OER have been viewed as fairly promising due to their potential to increase equitable access to educational opportunities, especially in developing countries (Ally & Samaka, 2013; Arinto et al., 2017; Bossu et al., 2012; Cape Town Declaration, 2007; McGreal 2017; Rets et al., 2020; UNESCO, 2012; Wright & Reju, 2012). It is optimistically believed that OER could yield participation of underrepresented learners and provide benefit for all, supporting the values of UNESCO, which aims to enact education policies that will ensure the proliferation of accessible no-cost resources for equitable learning outcomes in the world (UNESCO, 2019). In this way, OER have been perceived as a key player in providing developing countries with educational resources to combat educational deficits (Richter & McPherson, 2012). OER advocates argue that OER offer many benefits such as the provision of access to education, notably for disadvantaged learners in remote areas or who do not have the opportunities to participate in formal schooling experiences as well as the promotion of social inclusion (Bossu et al., 2012; Kanwar et al., 2010; Willems & Bossu, 2012). As such, more particular benefits of OER can be listed as repurposing of available resources with little to no cost, facilitating the knowledge exchange, and disseminating knowledge and expertise with time and financial savings (Bossu et al., 2012; Kanwar et al., 2010).

Despite this potential and its advantages, the adoption of OER in educational contexts did not appear to have lived up to expectations or seems slow to occur (Bozkurt et al., 2019; Ehlers, 2011; Ehlers & Conole, 2010; Pulker & Kukulska-Hulme, 2020). Challenges in the OER creation, use, and adoption are extensively discussed in the literature. For instance, in a recent study, Bozkurt et al. (2019) conducted a systematic review of peer-reviewed literature on openness in education utilizing content and social network analysis and text-mining methods. The authors found that while there is a growing interest in the OER movement, their use and adoption are not free of challenges such as quality concerns. Similarly, Loglo and Zawacki-Richter (2019) found that an OER source's quality was an important indicator of the extent to which OER can be used. Through a critical examination, Willems and Bossu (2012) explored the benefits and challenges of OER from an equity perspective. They noted the language of instruction, contextualization, technology, and access as challenging considerations for OER creation. Another significant concern addressed in the existing literature is that a great majority of research on OER have focused on higher education and college students. In contrast, K-12 education and teachers/educators have not received much attention (e.g., Perez-Parades et al., 2018). A similar concern was voiced in the literature that while the OER field has grown consistently since its inception nearly two decades ago, their use in classrooms remained scarce (Ganapathi, 2018; Hewlett Open Education Strategy, 2020). Furthermore, Hatakka (2009) listed language, relevance, access, technical resources, quality, and intellectual property as the main inhibiting factors for OER use.

Although all these factors deserve to be addressed individually, this paper exclusively focuses on the language of instruction as a factor inhibiting the growth of OER in developing countries, especially for non-native speakers of English and those who do not speak English at all. The next section elaborates on how language is a crucial tool in the use and adoption of OER. It also discusses how OER use can be widened in contexts where language might be a barrier.

### **English Language as a Barrier in OER Development and Inclusiveness**

In recent OER research, it has been highlighted that language plays a pivotal role in the use and adoption of OER worldwide. Consistent with UNESCO's initiative for spreading OER to make knowledge accessible, especially for disadvantaged and developing countries, English has been highly instrumental in disseminating knowledge through OER (McGreal, 2017). As most OER are in English, the English language can help spread of OER in developing countries, allowing the exchange of knowledge and filling the equity gap. This becomes deeply impactful considering the vast number of people speaking English as a first and second language globally. However, it is important to note that "English is still not understood by the vast majority of the world's population" (McGreal, 2017, p. 298). That is to say, on the one hand, English as a *lingua franca* (Jenkins et al., 2011; Seidlhofer, 2011) appears to be the most prevalent language that could serve the purpose of OER. On the other hand, a considerable number of

the world population that do not speak English is at risk of not being able to access OER in English, which ultimately lessens their chances to access information and knowledge presented in OER. To illustrate, English is spoken as a first language by approximately 527 million people in the world after Chinese (1.39 billion people) and Hindi-Urdu (588 million people) (Noack & Gamio, 2015). Even though English is not the most widely used first language in the world, it is the most commonly used second and foreign language with approximately 1.5 billion people, which makes English the language of communication around the world. Acknowledging that a substantial majority of the world population do not speak English and the English language learners (ELLs) considerably outweigh the number of native speakers of English, this study addresses the overreliance on English in OER from a social justice framework, which is explained in the next section.

### **Conceptual Framework**

We build this study on Hodgkinson-Williams and Trotter's (2018) conceptual framework, which is drawn from Fraser's (2005) social justice model. In their conceptual framework, Hodgkinson-Williams and Trotter listed Fraser's three dimensions as economic injustice (maldistribution), cultural inequality (misrecognition), and political inequality (misframing). In their study, they developed a slightly adapted version of Fraser's (2005) social justice framework to elucidate how the adoption of OER and OEP may mitigate economic injustice, cultural inequality, and political inequality in education.

According to Fraser (2009), economic maldistribution is that "people can be impeded from full participation by economic structures that deny them the resources they need in order to interact with others as peers; in that case they suffer from distributive injustice or maldistribution" (Fraser, 2009, p. 16). Hodgkinson-Williams and Trotter view that economic maldistribution in the education system manifests itself in the disparity of technological infrastructure worldwide such as inadequate computer access, low bandwidth, and digital resources. They note that OER can deal with economic inequality by reducing high education costs resulting from commercialized expensive educational materials as long as a certain standard of technological infrastructure is available. In support of this point, Bali et al. (2020) depict a teacher using open textbooks in class as a way to address economic injustice in their recent conceptual work on OEP from a social justice perspective.

Political misframing "tells us who is included in, and who excluded from, the circle of those entitled to a just distribution and reciprocal recognition" (Fraser, 2009, p. 16). Hodgkinson-Williams and Trotter stated that the restrictiveness of intellectual property policies does not allow educators to share their teaching materials. They add that the fair use guidelines are mostly vague and reduce educators' willingness and chances of sharing their materials.

Regarding cultural misrecognition, Fraser points out that "people can also be prevented from interacting on terms of parity by institutionalized hierarchies of cultural value that deny them the requisite standing; in that case they suffer from status inequality or misrecognition" (2009, p. 16). Hodgkinson-Williams and Trotter highlight that the abundance of OER offered in the Global North may have a cultural impact on users in the Global South. Even though Hodgkinson-Williams and Trotter propose three fundamental dimensions of justice, our study mainly draws on the cultural dimension as the focus of this paper aligns with the cultural inequality OER may cause. The present study is primarily concerned with the predominance of OER in English compared to other languages as most OER are created in the Global North countries. From a cultural standpoint, while this overreliance on English makes the Global North culture producers, it makes the Global South culture consumers, which may raise issues of cultural misrecognition as can be seen in the following quote by Hodgkinson-Williams and Trotter (2018):

In relation to OER and OEP this means that educators and students in the Global South may be deprived of participatory parity due to the current domination of Western-oriented epistemic perspectives and proliferation of hegemonic English-language OER, a condition that can only be countered through the creation, localization and/or

redistribution of OER in preferred languages and from alternative epistemic stances. Countering cultural inequality or misrecognition with ameliorative modifications or symbolic change would assist in valuing local languages and esteeming various cultural interpretations; the process and outcome that Fraser refers to as “recognition” (p. 207).

Drawing on the cultural dimension of Hodgkinson-Williams and Trotter’s (2018) adapted conceptual framework on social justice, this study offers the following propositions as a response to lessen the cultural injustice caused by the hegemony of the English language in OER: 1) linguistic complexity in OER, 2) translation as a method of OER adaptation, and 3) lack of OER development in local languages. The study elaborates on each of these after the methodology section.

## Methodology

This article is designed as a conceptual paper that bridges the “existing theories in interesting ways, link work across disciplines, provide multi-level insights, and broaden the scope of our thinking” (Gilson & Goldberg 2015, p. 128). The purpose of this paper is not to conduct a systematic literature review but critically examine the current state of art by reviewing the role of the English language in OER development and adoption, particularly in non-English speaking communities. Drawing on Hodgkinson-Williams and Trotter’s (2018) conceptual framework, which builds on Fraser’s (2005) social justice model, the present study discussed the affordances and challenges of OER and critically evaluated the role of English in (dis)empowerment of those in need of access to OER. In this study, qualitative content analysis (White & Marsh, 2006) was used to make meaningful inferences from texts (existing literature on OER) to the context (how OER are developed and adopted in non-English speaking communities). Analytical constructs in content analysis could be “derived from (1) existing theories or practices; (2) the experience or knowledge of experts; and (3) previous research” (Krippendorff, 2004 as cited in White & Marsh, 2006, p. 27). Focusing on the language of instruction in OER adoption as an analytical construct, this study benefited from existing theories and practices and previous research on OER with barriers to their adoption.

## Discussion

### Linguistic Complexity in OER

One of the components of openness is to ensure that all terms and concepts in OER are accessible to all learners via a common language, and open content is ideally fully and publicly available and usable by anyone (Baker, 2017). This automatically resonates with the idea that a common language like English can pave the way for enabling smooth accessibility and easy comprehension of OER by anyone. As such, English as a *lingua franca* has served a great purpose in disseminating the knowledge universally. The English language has dominated the OER development and use as per its global role in the world compared to other languages. By adopting a critical perspective on OER in Brazil, Ferreira and Lemgruber (2019) conducted a search on Google Scholar using the keyword OER both in English and Portuguese. The results came out as 3000 research publications in Portuguese while 37,000 in English, confirming the low adoption of OER in non-English speaking contexts. Even if learners in most countries do not officially read and speak English, there is a tendency to use OER in English for various reasons (e.g., English medium instruction, the popularity of English), increasing the use of OER in English than any other language. In a study where international students’ use of OER was investigated, Yilmaz (2011) found that a substantial percentage of students (88%) preferred to read or use OER in English, although only one respondent’s first language was English (as cited in Ally & Samaka, 2013).

Despite its pivotal role, some factors hinder the universal use of English in OER. While English is the most widely used language in the world, it is not fully understood by the vast majority of its users to successfully comprehend the course content in English (Hatakka, 2009; Rets et al., 2020). The level of

language used in OER could pose a significant risk as a barrier to understanding for many potential English learners. To the best of the authors' knowledge, only one study (Rets et al., 2020) has empirically investigated the extent of the language complexity in OER. Motivated by the solution to making OER in English more accessible to English learners by reducing OER reading materials' linguistic complexity, Rets et al. (2020) conducted a study to examine the readability of 200 courses in English from two OER course platforms. The authors found that "86% of courses on both OER platforms were only considered suitable for learners at the highest or advanced level of English proficiency" (p. 12). Their findings demonstrate that the English language used in a considerable number of OER creates a barrier and prevents less proficient readers of English from learning the OER's content, which ultimately undermines OER's inclusiveness as claimed in the literature (Hatakka, 2009; Willems & Bossu, 2012). Not to mention while ELLs might be able to read text-based OER, other forms of communication (e.g., audio-visual materials) can be more challenging for understanding, leaving a substantial percentage of the world population almost inaccessible to OER (Beaven et al., 2013). Therefore, these findings suggest that ELL proficiency levels need to be considered in OER design in order to reach out to a broader audience of ELLs.

The linguistic complexity taking place in most OER influences the inclusiveness, which can extensively hinder its universal use considering the large number of ELLs in the world (1.5 billion) (Rets et al., 2020). This situation creates unintended consequences for ELLs, inhibiting their access to universal knowledge and information diffused by OER in English. While most English OER are intended to reach out to a wide range of audiences, they use a highly complex level of English which prevents ELLs from accessing knowledge and information presented in OER. This unintended consequence appears to correspond with Fraser's (2005) "parity of participation" (p. 73) argument which posits that each individual has the equal right of participation as peers in social life as cited in Hodgkinson-Williams & Trotter (2018). This impediment to ELLs' equal participation in open educational practices (OEP) challenges them to access the information provided in those practices, exacerbating the cultural-epistemic injustices for ELLs.

### **Translation of OER from English to Local Languages**

As the preceding section discusses, OER in English, despite their complexity, have been relatively useful in promoting knowledge exchange globally. However, simple provision of OER may not lead to expected outcomes in developing countries. In fact, it may result in "greater dependency rather than sustainable development" (Richter & McPherson, 2012, p. 203). As noted, an important reason for the slower adoption and understanding of OER is related to the linguistic complexity used in OER development. One remedy for this concern has been translating the original content into local languages to extend OER worldwide (McGreal, 2017). Several successful initiatives have developed in translating and localizing OER. For example, the TESSA project (Teacher Education in Sub Saharan Africa), initiated and led by Open University, UK, provided support for teacher development in Sub Saharan Africa (Beaven et al., 2013). The original content was translated and adapted to Arabic, French, and Swahili in nine countries by recruiting subject specialists. In a more recent study, Ganapathi (2018) reports how certain OER providers like Pratham Books have catered their content to multiple languages and cultural differences in India where linguistic diversity is at its peak. Ganapathi adds that "while their OER platform allows the creation and translation of content in numerous languages and scripts, they also provide bilingual and multilingual resources tailored to certain communities" (p. 118). In light of this, Bali et al. (2020) support this argument that open textbooks "may venture into addressing cultural injustice if the open textbook is offered in different languages or adapted to integrate culturally-relevant content." In this way, translation may pave the way for making a broader range of information and knowledge available in open textbooks or other OER locally understandable to those who do not know English, which is labeled as an "affirmative (or ameliorative)" social justice action by Hodgkinson-Williams and Trotter (2018). However, it is important to note that being comprehensible does not always mean being meaningful and relevant for the local culture as put forward by Hodgkinson-Williams and Trotter below:

While translation may change the linguistic interface through which students engage with this knowledge, it may not do much to alter the underlying frames of reference upon which that knowledge is built. In contexts where the translation of foreign language OER might contribute to a broader erosion of locally derived ways of knowing, this otherwise pedagogically practical form of OEP might also inadvertently reinforce or deepen prevailing cultural inequalities. (2018, p. 214)

As seen, translation is not a straightforward phenomenon and may require substantial changes or even redesign of OER depending on the differences between the original and local OER. This may, of course, let us reevaluate/question the viability of translation as an optimal OER development method in local cultures with local languages. Furthermore, (verbatim) translation work may not be cost-effective if an extensive redesign or improvement is necessary. And translation into the local language would yield a considerable amount of work (Rets et al., 2020). Finally, there is also another substantial risk of copying the original content without accurate translation into the local context. In doing so, the translator may inadvertently lead to cultural conflict and jeopardize the preservation of the local culture as OER content may not resonate with the local culture, values, and norms. This risk is highlighted by Hodgkinson-Williams and Trotter (2018) that “translation, unless undertaken critically, may perpetuate cultural misrecognition (Fraser, 2005) by reinforcing dominant viewpoints,” which may “unintentionally reinforce epistemological and linguistic inequalities” (p. 218).

In sum, when done properly, translation may prove an effective way of expanding OER in developing countries to appeal to local communities’ needs. However, it may also endanger local cultural sensitivities and end up more expensive than planned. Considering all such factors, it would be necessary at times for local OER initiatives to develop their own OER in their language rather than translating the work, which might provide a more organic approach to OER development in accordance with local context and culture.

### **Development of OER in Local Languages with Local Cultures**

It is known that the majority of OER and resources on the Internet have been authored in English (Cobo, 2013; Willems & Bossu, 2012). Willems and Bossu (2012), for instance, reported that Wikipedia has a larger number of articles in English per total speakers than in any other language. According to their study in 2013, while English had almost 4 million Wikipedia articles, the total number of articles in French, Arabic, Swahili, Ganda, Chichewa, and Xhosa combined was fewer than 1.5 million. The present Wikipedia statistics also demonstrate a similar pattern with English spearheading the Wikipedia content with over 6 million articles (Wikimedia, 2020). Corroborating the previous research findings, Adam (2019) reports that more than half of the 11,400 MOOCs in the world are in English, confining the global knowledge to a specific language and culture. Adam underscores that this overreliance on English as a medium in MOOCs may pose significant risks for the ownership of knowledge and who shapes the global knowledge. Suppose trends are to continue in such a direction in OER development. In that case, developing countries or communities that do not speak English are more likely to be the “consumers of expanding knowledge” presented in OER rather than their producers (Cobo, 2013, p. 111). In consequence, as many OER, MOOCs, and Internet resources are authored in the Global North, they automatically become the producers of knowledge, whereas Global South communities become consumers of the knowledge, reducing their cultural recognition (Hodgkinson-Williams and Trotter, 2018).

The prevailing dominance of English may considerably lower non-English speakers’ chances in less developed countries to access knowledge provided by OER. While the rich and more affluent people have more opportunities in learning English and thereby more likely to access OER knowledge in English, the others in less wealthy or poor conditions are more likely to be deprived of the benefits of the OER in the target language. This situation may, unfortunately, result in widening the inequalities between the rich and poor as the rich get richer and the poor get poorer, exacerbating the cultural,

epistemic, and economic injustices in the world (see Arinto et al., 2017; Cox et al., 2020; and Lambert, 2018 for further information). As described above, OER's language may increase the injustices for populations that do not speak English in the world rather than closing intended gaps as planned or argued in the literature (Cobo, 2013).

In the preceding section, translating English OER has been viewed as a remedy to mitigate such injustices or divide. However, it does not always result in expected outcomes as it may not adequately address local culture, knowledge, and values. There is a far greater need for local OER to fit the learners' contexts and represent local perspectives (Koseoglu et al., 2020). Corroborating this need, McGreal (2017) noted that "OER can be localised and customised to the specific environment and to different approaches to learning" (p. 299). For instance, developing local contextualized OER representing the voices of developing communities may help reduce the inequalities deeply rooted in a society historically, culturally, and politically. In that, successful OER are likely to support local and marginalized populations to get heard by wider audiences. To illustrate, an increasing number of recent research on OER have argued for diversifying the voices represented in the OER to shrink the injustices and marginalization of specific populations relatively. In this regard, Veletsianos (2020) questioned to what extent the voices of "the scholar of color" are heard in OER when compared to the "tenured white professors" (p. 3). In a similar vein, Nusbaum (2020) criticized the predominance of the "Western/white/male/cishetero/abled perspective" in OER as this leaves the other perspectives as "other" and implicitly releases an association between success and the type of person that can accomplish it (p. 1).

The rise of social justice concerns raised by the researchers above and the recent special issue published in the *Journal of Interactive Media in Education* compel researchers and educators to speculate how social justice could be established through the affordances of open education. The following excerpt from Lambert (2018) exemplifies how perspectives of the marginalized can be represented in open textbooks, adopting a social justice lens through "redistributive, recognitive, and representational justice":

The example of an open textbook can be used to show how these principles can be applied to Open Education. Providing a free textbook to learners of colour in the American two-year college system, is redistributive justice in action. It reduces the costs and increases the chances of success for learners who "by circumstance have less" – they are marginalised in education, workplaces and more broadly in society. But how "open" is the textbook for marginalised learners if indigenous, Hispanic and learners of colour are invisible inside the textbook and perhaps invisible in the whole curriculum? The editing of such a textbook to include images and cases featuring more diverse communities, businesses and people will be an act of recognitive justice. But what if the textbook features people of colour, but does not value their perspectives, knowledges or histories? What if the textbook takes a white colonial view of black lives, if black stories are told solely by white voices? The development or selection of a new version of a textbook (or perhaps a new resource altogether) written by people of colour where they are free to represent their own views, histories and knowledges would be an act of representational justice, to give voice to those who are often not heard. (pp. 227-228)

Lambert's depiction of social injustices for underrepresented groups in the North American context and how social justice principles can be applied to reduce such injustices through an open textbook provides a relevant example for diversifying the voices in the OER. Her example rightfully reminds us of the cultural-epistemic injustices experienced by non-English speaking communities in developing countries. In Lambert's example, the underrepresented groups appear to have remained invisible and have not been heard in a broader context. Likewise, non-English speaking communities have largely remained invisible, and their voices have not been competitively authored in OER worldwide compared to the OER in English. As a response to Lambert's call, it is quite timely to create OER in local languages that may

represent voices, histories, knowledge, and perspectives of local learners (non-English speakers and non-native speakers of English), which could, to some extent, reduce the prevailing discourse style of Global North influencing the Global South. In addition, considering the heightened risk of cultural misrecognition of non-English languages and cultures, it is of paramount importance for the Global South to create OER in local languages in greater volumes as this helps them contribute to the global production of knowledge. By creating their own OER, Global South countries can prove the existence of “their own epistemic stance” and contribute to reducing social justice gaps in OER development (Hodgkinson-Williams and Trotter, 2018, p. 217).

### Conclusion

This article has primarily focused on openness and OER and discussed the factors inhibiting OER adoption, notably English as a language of instruction in OER. Drawing on Hodgkinson-Williams and Trotter’s (2018) conceptual framework, which builds on Fraser’s (2005) social justice model, the present study discussed the affordances and challenges of OER. It examined the role of the English language in (dis)empowerment of those in need of access to OER, particularly in non-English speaking contexts. Holding a critical lens, the article has addressed three main concerns from a social justice perspective in relation to the predominance of English in OER: the linguistic complexity in OER, translation as a method of OER adaptation, and lack of OER development in local languages.

In section *Linguistic Complexity in OER*, it was found that the English level used in most OER is far beyond the proficiency levels of a great majority of ELLs in countries where English is not the first language. The study highlighted that this might pose risks for non-native English speakers since they may not comprehend the content in a highly complex language found in most OER. Lastly, the article argued that linguistic complexity might reduce non-native speakers’ equal participation opportunities in OER knowledge, which results in unintended epistemic injustices for non-English speaking communities.

In section *Translation of OER from English to Local Languages*, this article briefly described the successful translation applications from original to local OER. Several strategies were offered to increase the success of translation into the local culture (e.g., avoidance of verbatim translation, redesign of OER when needed, consideration of local context). The paper, however, cautioned that despite being educationally valuable when appropriately done, a translation might fall short in ruling out the cultural differences between two languages if the translator is not mutually aware of both cultures. When needed, it might prove to be an efficient adaptation method rather than reinventing the wheel in the local language. However, due to cultural differences, the paper offered developing OER in local languages.

In section *Development of OER in Local Languages with Local Cultures*, this paper addressed the concerns related to the abundance of OER in the English language authored by people with western culture. It was noted that the predominance of English may jeopardize the likelihood of people that do not speak English in accessing knowledge offered in OER. Furthermore, addressing the concerns raised by the social justice perspective in OER, the paper exemplified how localizing OER could help non-English speaking communities represent their own voice and contribute to the global knowledge domain through OER.

### Suggestions and Implications

Based on the discussion of the three concerns, 1) linguistic complexity in OER, 2) translation as a method of OER adaptation, and 3) lack of OER development in local languages, covered in this study, the following suggestions can be considered by the future researchers and practitioners.

First, future practices could address the linguistic complexity of English OER. OER developers could intentionally consider ELLs' proficiency levels to reduce the linguistic complexity exhibited in most OER in English. This may include simplifying text in terms of morphology (vocabulary), syntax, and semantics. It may increase the chances for ELLs to comprehend and interact with OER content more effectively. Additionally, local OER developers may choose to adapt English OER with simplified versions in cases where a complete development in the local language may be impossible or costly. For text simplification, several text analysis tools could be used such as Coh-Metrix (<http://129.219.222.70:8084/Coh-Metrix.aspx>); L2 Syntactic Complexity Analyzer (L2SCA) (<https://aihaiyang.com/software/l2sca/>); Linguistic Analysis Tools (<https://www.linguisticanalysisitools.org/>); Text Inspector (<https://textinspector.com/>); and Compleat Web VP (<https://www.lex tutor.ca/vp/comp/>). Considering the magnitude of non-native speakers of English, which is even greater than the native speakers of English, future research may investigate how linguistic complexity of OER affects ELLs' OER engagement. This could shed light on a new line of research on linguistic complexity and OER use.

Second, it is essential to understand the culture of the target language into which an OER is translated so that OER translation and adaptation can be impactful. When translating OER, the culture of the original language, possibly English, may not be directly incorporated into the translated OER but rather can be blended with the local culture and knowledge. For example, a lesson plan OER from the American K-12 educational system may explain concepts according to Common Core Standards for the respective subject. And those standards may not align with the local education system into which the lesson plan will be translated. In this case, the translator is expected to know both cultures and tailor the OER to the local context, or OER developers from both cultures can work collaboratively to make the OER translation more meaningful and relevant in the local context.

Third, an alternative approach to counter cultural epistemic injustices is to increase the local OER development. In doing so, OER developers should recognize learners' lived experiences through culturally relevant pedagogy (Koseoglu et al., 2020; Ladson-Billings, 1995), humanizing pedagogy (Karakaya, 2020; Bartolome, 1994), and pedagogy of care (Karakaya, 2020; Noddings, 1984), which foreground issues of equity and gives visibility to design for inclusion of diverse communities. Adopting culturally relevant pedagogy and pedagogy of care entails OER developers to be more cognizant of the target learners' backgrounds, interests, and culture. By drawing on the mentioned pedagogies, more initiatives should be established to promote local OER development to contribute to the knowledge base in the world, representing their language and culture. Lastly, governments should offer funding and grants to support the development and use of local OER as well as training OER developers.

In closing, the OER movement has evolved and developed since the 2000s and has contributed to the proliferation of knowledge and information exchange to lower the educational deficit in the world. However, unless social justice principles are not prioritized in OER development, they may not fulfill their goal.

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### **Conflict of interest**

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

### **Research involving human and/or animals as participants**

This research does not involve human participants or animals.

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