

The UCL School of Slavonic and East European Studies (SSEES)
and
the FAVOR Project



Language teachers working at the UCL School of Slavonic and East European Studies (SSEES) participated in FAVOR (Finding a Voice through Open Resources), a JISC-funded project aimed at raising the profile of part-time and hourly-paid teachers by giving them the opportunity to publish and share materials they had previously created and to create new materials as open resources for publication and sharing. This was done through Language Box, a repository maintained by the Centre for Language, Linguistics and Area Studies (LLAS) at the University of Southampton, who also led the project.

The language teachers who participated:



**Christopher
Moseley**
(Estonian &
Latvian)



**Riitta-Liisa
Valijärvi**
(Finnish)



**Eszter
Tarsoly**
(Hungarian)



**Dragan
Milovic**
(Serbian)



**Olga
Willett**
(Slovak)



**Marta
Jenkala**
(Ukrainian)

Before taking part in the project, most language teachers at SSEES had not had personal contact with open practice or Open Educational Resources (OERs), so this was an interesting and stimulating experience which was very different from projects undertaken previously.

There was, initially, a certain apprehension on the part of the teachers as to how the idea of not only sharing, but allowing the re-purposing of materials, would work. We first approached the issue by looking at open resources already on Language Box and other websites. We agreed that, if we amended existing resources, and created new ones, with the specific intention of publication and sharing (rather than just for our own use), the fact that they would be shared and re-purposed could be taken into account right from the start, and the resources could be produced in a different way. Once teachers began to upload

their resources, enthusiasm grew. They welcomed the opportunity to publish their profiles on Language Box, and commented on the ease with which materials can be uploaded (albeit with minor technical hitches) and how empowering and motivating it was to have control over uploading one's own materials.

Given the flexible and informal structure of Language Box, teachers have been inspired to publish a wide range of resources – over 120 at the last count – in Estonian, Finnish, Hungarian, Latvian, Serbian, Slovak and Ukrainian.

A wide range of resources for teachers and students was published, including Estonian recipes and instructions on taking a sauna, Slovak proverbs and how to write emails in the language, interviews with students of Finnish, Hungarian one-minute stories, Serbian scientists and sports people, a Ukrainian language taster, exploring methods for teaching reading in Finnish and Hungarian, an article on the UNESCO Atlas Of the World's Languages in Danger and many others.

The FAVOR project brought together various categories of hourly-paid and part-time teachers, including teaching fellows and evening course teachers, all of whom were able to share their experience and ideas. A number of other teachers expressed an interest in the project but did not feel able to take part, owing to other commitments (often outside teaching) which they, in common with other part-time teachers, need to take on.

One of the “unique selling points” of UCL SSEES is the wide range of Slavonic and East European languages on offer to students at undergraduate and postgraduate level, as well as to the general public, in the form of evening courses. This is appreciated by the institution's management, and the FAVOR project was welcomed and supported as a relatively rare opportunity for language teachers to work together and develop professionally.

Not only do teachers tend to work in isolation from others who teach their language, they have little opportunity to discuss common issues, types of resources, teaching methods etc. with teachers of other languages. The FAVOR project has provided an opportunity for this, and we have seen the emergence of a different kind of sharing – looking at what has been uploaded in other languages and using those ideas and formats for oneself. For the languages taught at SSEES, which are relatively under-resourced when compared to mainstream ones such as French and Spanish, this is a considerable benefit. Particularly appreciated, too, was the opportunity, through FAVOR funding, to attend training sessions, workshops and conferences.

As an outcome of the project, teachers have come to view OERs (and the opportunity to publish them on Language Box) as a means of promoting their languages, both to potential university students and in general. It is to be hoped that this will increase the number of people who wish to learn – this can only improve the situation in terms of a higher profile and enhanced teaching prospects for part-time language teachers.

In conclusion, here are some of the evaluations made by SSEES language teachers who participated in the project:

- “... it was great to be able to compare your resources with those of your colleagues”
- “... the project helped me evaluate the materials that I had created previously”
- “... the project gave language teachers an opportunity to review and edit existing materials, and to rethink such materials in order to adapt them for online and independent use”
- “... it gives a sense of fairness to be paid for reviewing and updating existing materials – this part of a language teacher’s job is often taken for granted even if it can be quite a laborious task at times”
- “... it highlighted the complexity of creating new materials: I found it challenging to create generic materials; it’s easier when the materials you create are a result of a specific need, i.e. a class that you are teaching”
- “... Language Box is an excellent, user-friendly interface to encourage collaboration and exchange of materials and ideas between linguist colleagues and language teachers; uploading materials is a good way of taking stock of what we normally use of our own materials at different levels; it helps to render materials accessible for students; one would only like to see it expand and improve even more in the future”
- “... the mere existence of the project helped boost language professionals’ confidence and well-being at work in circumstances which are uneasy these days in higher education”