

Open Educational Resources for inclusive language

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Introduction: Why inclusive language education matters

Language education increasingly takes place in classrooms characterized by linguistic, cultural, and cognitive diversity. Learners bring varied educational backgrounds, lived experiences, and ways of processing information. Neurodiverse and plurilingual learners are not exceptions within contemporary language programs. They are central participants whose needs challenge instructional models that rely heavily on fixed textbooks, standardized pacing, and uniform assessment practices. When materials and learning activities lack flexibility, learners may encounter barriers to access, engagement, and meaningful participation.

Open Educational Resources (OER) offer a promising pathway toward more inclusive language education. OER are teaching and learning materials that are freely available and openly licensed, allowing educators to use, adapt, and share them. Their value extends beyond affordability. Because open resources can be revised, localized, and redesigned, they allow instructors to respond to learner needs, cultural contexts, and instructional goals when paired with inclusive design frameworks such as Universal Design for Learning (UDL), and OER supports learner agency and reduces reliance on retroactive accommodations.

This article explores how OER can be used intentionally to support neurodiverse and plurilingual learners in language education. Using reflective discussion and classroom-based examples, it presents practical strategies that promote accessibility, engagement, and learner choice. This discussion builds on a TESL Ontario conference session in which I shared how OER and Universal Design for Learning have informed my inclusive language teaching practice with neurodiverse and plurilingual adult learners.

Understanding learner diversity in language education

A wide range of learner identities and learning preferences shapes language classrooms. Neurodiverse learners may process information differently, experience challenges with attention or sensory input, or



require additional time and structure to engage with learning tasks. A neurodiversity informed perspective recognizes these differences as part of natural human variation rather than as deficits to be corrected (Armstrong, 2010). In language learning contexts, difficulties often arise not from learner limitations but from instructional designs that rely on lengthy texts, rapid explanations, or single modality interaction.

Plurilingual learners add another critical dimension of diversity. Plurilingualism refers to the dynamic use of multiple languages as an interconnected repertoire rather than as separate, isolated systems (Council of Europe, 2001). Learners may draw on their home languages to support comprehension, reflection, and meaning making while developing proficiency in an additional language. However, when monolingual norms dominate instruction, learners may be discouraged from using linguistic resources that could otherwise enhance learning and confidence.

In practice, neurodiverse and plurilingual learners often encounter similar barriers. These may include abstract instructions, limited visual or multimodal support, rigid assessment formats, and restricted opportunities to demonstrate learning in ways that reflect individual strengths. Access-related barriers, such as limited technology or reliance on costly materials, can further reduce participation. When these barriers are not addressed at the design stage, learners may appear disengaged or unsuccessful, even when they are motivated and capable.

Recognizing learner diversity as a starting point rather than an exception invites educators to reconsider how language learning environments are designed. By viewing neurodiversity and plurilingualism as assets, instructors can shift toward teaching approaches that emphasize flexibility, accessibility, and learner agency.

Universal Design for Learning as an inclusive framework

Universal Design for Learning is a research-based framework that supports proactive and inclusive course design. Rather than addressing learner needs through individual accommodations after challenges emerge, UDL encourages instructors to anticipate learner variability during the design stage. This approach shifts responsibility from learners adapting to rigid instructional structures toward educators designing learning environments that are accessible from the outset.

Developed by CAST, UDL is grounded in learning sciences and recognizes that learners differ in motivation, information processing, and expression of understanding (CAST, 2018). In language education, where linguistic diversity intersects with cognitive and cultural variability, UDL provides a practical framework for inclusive practice.

The UDL framework is organized around three core principles: learner motivation, relevance, and emotional connection to learning. In language classrooms, this may involve offering topic choice, incorporating short



and varied activities, and creating opportunities for collaboration and self-regulation. These strategies are particularly supportive for learners who experience anxiety, reduced attention, or disengagement in traditional instructional settings.

Multiple means of representation address how information is presented. This principle encourages instructors to provide content in different formats, such as combining written text with visuals, audio, or interactive elements. Captions, glossaries, visuals, and simplified explanations can improve comprehension for plurilingual learners and those who process information differently, without reducing academic rigor.

Multiple means of action and expression emphasize flexibility in how learners demonstrate understanding. Rather than relying on a single written task or timed assessment, instructors can offer options such as oral responses, visual projects, collaborative work, or reflective writing. These choices allow learners to draw on their strengths and promote a sense of agency.

UDL is not about making learning easier. It is about removing unnecessary barriers so that all learners can access, engage with, and demonstrate meaningful learning.

Open Educational Resources in inclusive language education

Open Educational Resources are teaching, learning, and research materials that are openly licensed and free to use, revise, and share (UNESCO, 2019). Open licensing distinguishes OER from freely available online materials by providing legal permission for adaptation. For language educators, this flexibility allows materials to be simplified, localized, or expanded to better meet learner needs.

Many OER are published under Creative Commons licenses, which clearly outline how resources may be reused and adapted (Creative Commons, n.d.). In practice, this allows instructors to add glossaries, captions, bilingual explanations, or visual supports to existing materials. These adaptations are not remedial measures. They are intentional design choices that increase accessibility and participation.

OER align closely with Universal Design for Learning because both emphasize flexibility and learner agency. Rather than relying on a single textbook or instructional sequence, educators can curate collections of adaptable resources that allow learners to access content in different ways and demonstrate understanding through varied formats. While cost reduction is often highlighted as a primary benefit of OER, its deeper value lies in its potential to promote equity and inclusive design.

For adult learners, newcomers, and students with limited access to financial or technological resources, free



and adaptable materials can significantly reduce barriers to participation. When used intentionally, OER shift the focus from affordability alone toward inclusive pedagogy.

Practical strategies for using and adapting OER

The inclusive potential of OER is most evident in everyday teaching practices. Effective strategies often involve small, intentional adaptations aligned with UDL principles rather than large-scale course redesign.

Listening and viewing materials can be enhanced by adding captions, providing transcripts, or allowing learners to control playback speed. These options support learners who process auditory information differently and reduce cognitive load. Transcripts also allow learners to review content at their own pace, supporting comprehension and confidence.

Textual and visual adaptations are equally important. OER texts can be simplified without removing core meaning, divided into shorter sections, or paired with images. Slides and readings can include key vocabulary lists or glossaries to support comprehension. For plurilingual learners, bilingual glossaries or permission to annotate materials in home languages acknowledge multilingualism as a resource rather than a barrier.

Assessment design offers further opportunities for inclusion. Openly licensed assignments and rubrics can be adapted to allow flexible timelines, multiple attempts, or alternative formats. Learners may demonstrate understanding through written work, short presentations, visual projects, or reflective tasks, supporting learner agency and alignment with UDL principles.

In one adult ESL class, I adapted an openly licensed listening activity by adding captions, a transcript, and optional visual prompts. Learners were invited to choose how they engaged with the task and how they responded. Some relied on captions, others on the transcript, and a few responded orally rather than in writing. Participation increased, particularly among learners who had previously hesitated to contribute, illustrating how small OER adaptations can reduce barriers and support engagement.

OER also support flexible participation. Discussion prompts can be offered in written and audio formats, with learners responding through text, voice recordings, or visuals. These options reduce anxiety and encourage broader participation.

Instructor mindset and inclusive practice

Inclusive language education depends not only on frameworks and resources but also on instructor mindset. Asset based perspectives recognize neurodiverse and plurilingual learners as contributors rather



than problems to be managed. This view aligns with UDL, which treats learner variability as expected and central to instructional design (CAST, 2018).

Instructor roles shift from content delivery to learning design and facilitation. This involves anticipating barriers, curating adaptable materials, and creating opportunities for learner feedback. OER support this role by enabling ethical revision and sharing of materials and by encouraging collaboration among educators.

Collaboration strengthens inclusive practice. Sharing adapted resources, remixing existing OER, and contributing back to open repositories foster collective responsibility for accessibility. Small reflective actions, such as revising a single activity or responding to learner feedback, can lead to sustained improvement over time.

Conclusion: Moving toward inclusive and open language education

As language classrooms continue to diversify, inclusive and open approaches are increasingly essential. Universal Design for Learning and Open Educational Resources together offer practical pathways for responding to learner variability with flexibility and intention. OER should be viewed not only as free alternatives to textbooks but as adaptable tools that support access, engagement, and learner agency.

When aligned with UDL, OER allow instructors to offer multiple ways for learners to access content, stay motivated, and demonstrate understanding. Small design choices, such as captions, glossaries, and flexible assessments, can significantly reduce barriers. These practices benefit all learners by creating clearer, more responsive learning environments.

Inclusive language education does not require a complete course redesign. Meaningful change often begins with manageable steps, such as adapting one resource or sharing one revised activity. By embracing openness as a pedagogical stance, language educators can contribute to more equitable, inclusive, and sustainable learning communities.



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Author Bio



Anh Le-Noronha is a post-secondary educator and educational developer with over fifteen years of experience teaching language, hospitality and tourism, and business courses. Her work focuses on inclusive pedagogy, Universal Design for Learning (UDL), and the use of Open Educational Resources (OER) to support neurodiverse and plurilingual learners. She has taught at George Brown College and Centennial College in Toronto, Canada, and many colleges and universities in Vietnam. She supports adult learners through accessibility-focused teaching, curriculum design, and learner-centred assessment practices.