Computer Assisted Language Learning

New skills for new classrooms: Training tutors to teach languages online

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New Skills for New Classrooms: Training tutors to teach languages online

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While online teaching in post-compulsory education is the focus of much research today, the training of online tutors has largely been neglected. Most papers do not go beyond dealing with the technical skills that are needed to teach in an online environment. This article outlines a framework for tutor training, starting with a brief overview of benefits and challenges for online language tutors. On the basis of several years' experience with teaching languages using a synchronous online environment and training tutors for online language courses, we suggest a pyramid of skills necessary for successful online teaching. These include the more general skills of dealing with the technology and using its advantages, the social skills of community building, language teaching skills, and the skills to teach creatively and develop a personal teaching style in an online medium. The article then suggests how these skills can be implemented in a training programme, which includes both pre-course training and ongoing staff development.

Introduction

Online tuition of languages in post-compulsory education faces a predicament: despite the wealth of materials and the willingness of teachers and institutions to offer online courses, there is still a dearth of high quality training to teach online. This lack of initial and continuing staff education has been identified as one of the main reasons why online learning is not used enough:

> Dass das ergänzende Lernen im virtuellen Klassenraum noch wenig genutzt wird, liegt m.E. vor allem daran, dass nur wenige Lehrende und Ausbilder eine adäquate

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Ausbildung und dementsprechend Erfahrung im Umgang mit dieser Lernform besitzen. Hier sind Universitäten und Weiterbilder in der Lehrerfortbildung gefragt. (Reisinger-Schapler, 2003, p. 14)[1]

Much effort and cost in creating online material can be wasted without the adequate training of teachers to present and support the learning. As Salmon (2003) states emphatically: "Any significant initiative aimed at changing teaching methods or the introduction of technology into teaching and learning should include effective e-moderator support and training, otherwise its outcomes are likely to be meagre and unsuccessful" (p. 80). A course whose subject matter is communication necessitates this training and support even more: online language courses, especially at lower levels, need to focus on the form of the interaction as well as the content. We would argue that the medium influences the form of interaction in written and spoken language.

Since the late 1970s most language courses have been based on a communicative approach (see Hymes, 1971), where "language production emphasises the pragmatic function of language and points towards an understanding of language as interaction" (Hotho, 1996, pp. 14–15). Primacy is given to developing communicative competence, following Canale and Swain's (1980) integrative theory of communicative competence, "one in which there is a synthesis of knowledge of basic grammatical principles, knowledge of how language is used in social contexts to perform communicative functions, and knowledge of how utterances and communicative functions can be combined according to the principles of discourse" (p. 20). In addition, a communicative approach takes into account the learner's communication needs and can make use of aspects of communicative skills already acquired with the first language.

Online learning material for languages can provide a number of ways to meet most of the principles Canale and Swain posit. In particular the availability of authentic teaching and learning materials makes the online environment ideally suited for communicative tasks: Web-searches and email exchanges with other learners are just two examples of the vast opportunities an online environment affords. This can even provide an "opportunity to take part in meaningful communicative interaction with highly competent speakers of the language" (Canale & Swain, 1980, p. 27).

But where online material is designed solely to alleviate the work of the teacher, it has often failed to provide the support necessary for successful independent learning. Communicative competence is best taught online when both factors, authentic and meaningful interaction *and* the necessary pedagogical support, are combined: In the best case, language tutorials via the Internet can offer the chance to participate in live synchronous written and spoken interaction with peers and tutors who provide scaffolding for learning to take place.

However, online teachers need different skills than those normally employed by tutors trained to teach languages in a face-to-face classroom and they also require different skills compared to online teachers of other subjects. The asynchronicity of communication in written conferencing and the lack of non-verbal clues in audio-conferencing are examples of new challenges for online language tutors.

The next section of this article provides a brief overview of the use of Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) for teaching languages online and the challenges this poses for teachers. We then describe the skills that are required of tutors in an online environment, presented in the shape of a ''pyramid of skills''. The next section is mainly concerned with suggestions for the implementation of these theoretical deliberations in practice, based on our experience. The final section offers a brief outlook and some suggestions for further development. This paper draws on a larger study; an article reporting on the practical implementation of online tutor training at the Open University and its evaluation will be published separately as a case study.

Teaching Languages Online

There has been a considerable interest in the delivery of language courses online, initially focussing on written asynchronous interaction (see Warschauer, 1997). More recent technologies have made it possible for students and their tutors to meet virtually, bringing them together via computer networks in video or audio conferences (for an overview see, for example, Almeida d'Eça, 2003). Synchronous conferencing systems that support multi-point audio are of great potential value for language learning, especially at a distance, with the distance becoming largely irrelevant when it comes to oral interaction (Hampel & Hauck, 2004).

Kelm (1996) analyses the benefits of asynchronous written CMC and concludes as follows:

> Electronic network communications follow many of the principles expressed in language acquisition theories, especially in the ability to present a natural language environment with concrete referents, promote communication among peers, provide expansive feedback, allow correction to be independent from communication, treat network communications as experiential learning activities and allow socialization and communication to take precedence over form. On balance, the implementation of electronic networks has the potential to assist language instructors in reaching their goal of bringing individuals together so that they might communicate across linguistic boundaries. (Kelm, 1996, p. 19)

To give just one example: Mizza, at the Italian Department of the University of Warwick, introduced a blended approach to a writing class for students of Italian. Starting in the first year in a traditional face-to-face classroom, she added email exchanges in Italian to ease students into using the online medium. In the second year of the project, all writing was to be done online and in the target language (Mizza, 2004). Using written CMC to support writing is obviously a promising approach. However, it can also pose challenges when it is employed to foster interaction. Communication is limited to one single mode and happens in a delayed fashion, and the skills that are required of a tutor to engage learners and motivate them to interact with one another in such an environment are very different compared to a face-to-face setting.

More recent technologies make it possible for students and their tutors to go beyond asynchronicity, allowing students to interact in real time over a distance. Kern (1995, p. 461), who examined the quantity and characteristics of the discourse in a synchronous written conferencing environment, found that using this medium led to more turns, to more language produced, encouraged a collaborative spirit, enhanced motivation for language practice, reduced anxiety, and had positive effects on students' writing ability and perhaps speaking ability as well. When examining the acquisition of interactive competence in a German class, Chun (1994) found that ''computer-assisted class discussion (CACD) provides learners with the opportunity to generate and initiate different kinds of discourse, which in turn enhances their ability to express a greater variety of *functions* in different *contexts* as well as to play a greater role in managing the discourse'' (p. 18). Despite these benefits, synchronous written CMC also poses a number of challenges. Online ''classroom'' management is very different to a face-to-face classroom; turn-taking, for example, needs to be organized very differently and teachers have to support learners in coping with a differently structured discourse, one that is characterized by parallel conversational threads.

For the longest time, conferencing has been limited to one mode, not allowing learners to practise spoken language; and it is debatable whether language skills are easily transferable from one mode (written) to another (spoken). In her study in 2003, de la Fuente of the Department of Spanish and Portuguese at the Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee (de la Fuente, 2003) investigated whether written synchronous CMC would have the same effect on oral and written vocabulary acquisition as similar tasks performed in face-to-face negotiations. There is clear evidence that both forms aid vocabulary acquisition; yet her results with regards to the differences in oral language acquisition between the virtual and the face-to-face are not statistically significant. Other research has found that while a synchronous written environment can provide learners with a medium for rehearsing oral language and can thus indirectly contribute to the development of oral skills (see Weininger & Shield, 2003), it has to be enhanced with practice in an environment that allows for oral communication (see, for example, Payne & Whitney, 2002; Warschauer, 1996).

With the advent of audio- and videoconferencing, synchronous oral interaction has now become an option for language teaching. Audio-conferencing today has become reliable and offers a sound quality that is good enough for pronunciation practice. Erben (1999), for example, describes its use in a B.Ed. Degree programme at Central Queensland University, in which up to 80% of the curriculum is delivered through the medium of Japanese. His study indicates ''that an immersion education through audiographic technology is not only possible but highly facilitative of instructional practices that promote the negotiation of content through language immersion and the professional development of student teachers in the area of technoliteracy'' (p. 245). While some audiographic conferencing systems allow multi-user interactions and offer us most of the modes we commonly use to communicate (i.e. sound, written text, and graphics), these have to be accessed and used through the computer

medium and the electronic tools. Modes, however, undoubtedly have different affordances compared to a face-to-face setting. Learners thus have to be supported in dealing with technical and navigational issues as well as with interacting in a foreign language, and this can lead to cognitive overload. Another factor influencing the teaching in an audiographic environment is the fact that it does not allow for body language, a mode of interaction particularly important for language teaching and learning. This lack of body language has a number of consequences on the areas of classroom management and learner anxiety. Previous studies with audiographic conferencing at the Open University have shown "that learners with only a basic or intermediate competence in the target language require more tutorial support than was anticipated" (Kötter, 2001, pp. 347–348).

Wang (2004, p. 382) lists four criteria for evaluating videoconferencing tools: quality, reliability, and user-friendliness; we might want to add cost-efficiency as an additional consideration. If videoconferencing were to meet all these criteria to the same extent as audio conferencing, it might be the preferable option for language courses. However, at present, videoconferencing without Broadband Internet connection is not yet good enough for language learning. Time lags and poor connection can lead to a loss of lip synchronization, which can be problematic at beginners' level, where learners might want to follow lip movement.

Coverdale-Jones (2000) used online videoconferencing in two pilot studies to link up English students of German with German students of English. She contrasts the main benefit of videoconferencing for language learning (authenticity because of the immediacy of communication with real people) with its disadvantages. She identifies some technical challenges such as the distortion of audio and video signal, which makes lip reading and reading of facial expressions impossible. She also points to the time lag, which has an impact on turn-taking (which needs to be more deliberate) and observes that interruptions are less likely to happen than in a face-to-face situation. On an interpersonal level, she reports that the personal feel is lost and students seem to distance themselves from the "other" side; on an intrapersonal level she observes that if the video includes the picture of oneself, participants are more conscious of the visual effect they are creating. Her conclusion is that "tutors need to allow for the reduced nature of the medium by planning for collaboration for a common goal and for optimal communication" (2000, p. 38).

In order to fulfil their role, online tutors have to not only help students to develop their technical skills in using the virtual environment but also constantly be aware of benefits and challenges of online learning. They have to be familiar with the technology and know about the implications that the medium has in the context of teaching a language. They have to rely on their expertise as a language teacher as well as knowing how to use virtual environments in the context of useful approaches to language learning (e.g., the communicative approach). The next two sections of this article are therefore concerned with outlining the skills needed for teaching in online environments in more detail and examining how this can inform a training programme for tutors.

Skills for Online Language Tutors

The benefits and challenges identified in the previous section indicate that the skills needed when teaching online are different from those needed in a face-to-face setting. While students' skills have been researched in more detail (see Erben, 1999; Warschauer, 1999), there is less knowledge about the skills that tutors need. Some work has been done on identifying technical and communication skills. Thus Barker (2002) lists the following: using electronic mail, creating, managing, and participating in asynchronous conferences, using chat room, word processing skills, web page authoring, and using specific purpose tools. He does not, however, examine these skills in detail, and although he points out the importance of training for the acquisition of these skills he does not outline a training programme.

Literature about training online tutors is clustered mainly around technical and software-specific skills, dealing with ICT problems and limitations, although there is some recognition that this is not enough. Bennett and Marsh (2002), in a case study on training tutors, maintain that "[t]o be an effective online tutor, it is clearly not enough to know which buttons to press in order to send an e-mail or which HTML coding is required to insert an image on a web page" (p. 14). Skills for good online teaching go beyond these to take into account more far-reaching pedagogical issues. Bennett and Marsh point to two types of skills beyond the technical level: to "identify the significant differences and similarities between face-to-face and online learning and teaching contexts" and to "identify strategies and techniques to facilitate online learning and help students exploit the advantages in relation to both independent and collaborative learning" (p. 16).

Very few researchers go beyond this level to address another pedagogical issue: the skill of creating online communities or social entities for language learning. In the context of sociocultural theory, McLoughlin and Oliver (1999), for example, point to the importance of creating a community as one strategy "that can be used to ensure that learning is meaningful, socially based and supportive of cognitive outcomes" (p. 40). To a certain degree, this lack of research is to be expected; researchers will focus more on pedagogic issues as soon as the need for "how-to" guides is fulfilled and lower-level skills can be taken for granted. It can be hoped that the specific issues of community building will also be addressed in research on language teaching—as mentioned before, teaching languages face-to-face requires different skills from other subjects and so does teaching languages online.

Simply listing the skills required for online tutoring would not do justice to the complexity of the training and development needed. Online tuition skills for languages build on one another[2] in a kind of pyramid, from the most general skills forming a fairly broad base to an apex of individual and personal styles. The lower levels are necessary before a higher level skill can come to fruition—the most wonderful creativity would be wasted if the tutor lacks the skill to connect with the students. The skills pyramid (see Figure 1) tries to give an overview of these skills.

The most basic skill for an online tutor is competence in the use of networked computers, including the use of keyboard and mouse, and familiarity with common
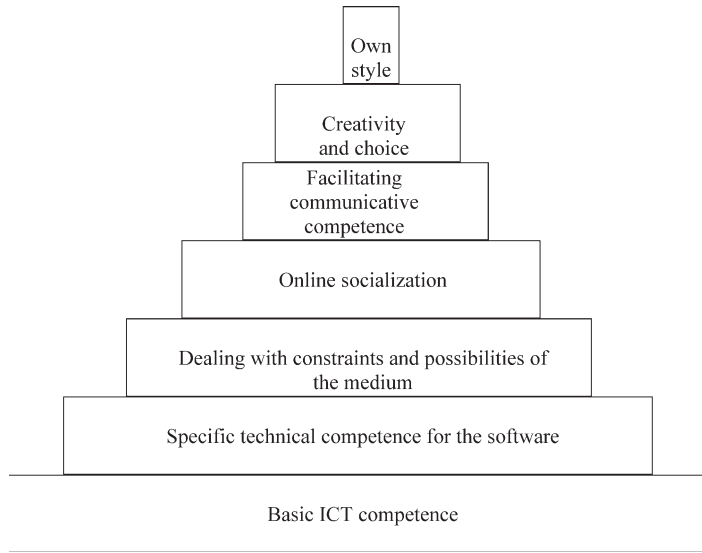
Figure 1. Skills pyramid

commands and applications, for example, word processing, Internet, audio replay. Although this description might seem trite nowadays, it would not always have been taken for granted that language tutors needed to possess these skills.[3] Skills on this level might nowadays be a prerequisite for selecting tutors to teach online.

The next higher level of our pyramid is formed by the skills necessary to use the specific software application needed to teach either at the individual tutor's institution or even just on one particular course. This could be a publicly available email or conferencing system like Yahoo; commercially available educational software such as Blackboard; or custom-made audio-graphic conferencing software, for example Lyceum (the Open University's teaching software developed in-house). Regardless of how widely used the software is, tutors need to familiarize themselves with it before they can be expected to use it for online teaching.

One level up on the pyramid of skills, tutors need to learn how to deal with constraints and affordances of the particular software they are using. Although there may be more user-friendly or more advanced alternatives, tutors are often committed to the application on hand to teach their courses and will have to make the best of it. At the extreme end, tutors accustomed to face-to-face teaching of languages might find it hard to adapt to a text-only interaction medium like email or to text-focused media like instant messaging. Not only will tutors need to adapt their material and teaching content, they will also have to help students to adjust their expectations of the course.

On the next level, the skill of the language tutor to create a sense of community in their classroom is dealt with.[4] Not every tutor, whether face-to-face or online, will be successful in this, nor will every tutor (or indeed, every institution) regard this level as a necessity despite the recent emphasis on collaborative learning, communities of

practice, and constructive development of knowledge (see, for example, Ellis, 2003). The basic form of "socialization" is the adherence to certain behavioural roles or protocols. In face-to-face classrooms, we would hope that students behave in a reasonable, non-violent manner, are civil to each other and to their tutor and—if we are lucky—pay attention to the content of the class. Online, there are similar requirements, often referred to as "netiquette", that is, the "dos and don'ts" of online behaviour. To encourage students to stick to these online protocols is similar to just "keeping discipline" in a face-to-face classroom. Above and beyond that, a tutor might hope to create a sense of community, a group feeling or an atmosphere of trust and confidence in a classroom or online learning group.[5]

In the context of communicative language teaching, there is no doubt that a classroom without a sense of community will be ill-suited for successful learning. Role-plays, dialogues, information gap exercises, simulations—basically any form of "meaningful communicative interaction" (Canale & Swain, 1980, p. 27)—would hardly take place in a classroom without social cohesion and would certainly not provide successful practice opportunities for communicative encounters. The level of trust in a classroom might be particularly relevant in a beginners' language course where the students potentially feel more insecure and less able to express themselves, but all language classrooms share the problem of "language anxiety" to a greater or lesser degree. In the absence of what we have come to take for granted in face-to-face encounters as "social presence", the tutor will need to take extra care to provide opportunities for disclosure of personal information and feedback. Since socialization and community building in an online environment takes different skills than for the face-to-face classroom, there is no guarantee that even the most jovial and well-liked tutor of face-to-face courses can become a successful online teacher at this level.

The next level of skills, associated with facilitating communicative competence, can be based directly on the successful socialization of the students into a cohesive group of online learners. Although proponents of other pedagogies such as an information transmission approach to teaching might like to dispense with the skills level of socialization and replace communicative competence with the teaching of content,[6] the priority of content over communication is not compatible with communicative language teaching, which relies on interaction between the participants. Encouraging interaction in an online environment can be achieved through task design (Strijbos, Martens, & Jochems, 2004) and tutor intervention. Even a course using pre-designed interactive materials will still allow for different management of turn-taking and different ways of personalizing the contact with students (Stickler, Batstone, Duensing, & Heins, 2004).

The next level of skills for online language tutors in our pyramid deals with creativity and choice. Although the World Wide Web has been heralded as a rich source for enhancing creativity in teaching, in reality this often seems to be limited to doing little more than offering lengthy lists of "good resources" and "good ideas". The ability of an online tutor to choose amongst the vast array of materials available online—good, authentic language learning materials—is different in scope, if not in

quality, from the ability to choose the right exercise or the right text book. At its best, language teaching can be a creative and enjoyable enterprise and teaching online should not hinder tutors from using all the creativity they can employ face-to-face. The most obvious way to display the skill of creativity is in designing online activities with the communicative principles in mind. However, even if tutors are given pre-prepared materials, they still need to display choice in selecting, implementing, and adapting the given tasks. There is also ample scope for creativity in virtual environments where the roles of tutor and learners have not yet been fixed and where the resources and their affordances are very different compared to face-to-face settings.

On the highest level of the skills pyramid, an online teacher will have developed her or his own personal teaching style, using the media and materials to their best advantage, forming a rapport with his or her students and using the resources creatively to promote active and communicative language learning.

To illustrate the various skills employed at different levels of the pyramid, we will apply the concept to teaching via audio-graphic conferencing and give examples for skills on every level below. Concrete examples are taken from our experience of the synchronous audio-graphic conferencing system Lyceum, developed and used in language group tutorials at the Open University.

- Basic ICT competence: The tutor knows how to deal with sound problems, s/he is aware that they could be related to the soundcard, headset, ISP connection, or firewall.
- Specific technical competence: The tutor skilfully uses different tools in Lyceum (e.g., by booking virtual ''classrooms'', gathering students in front of one screen, importing images on a whiteboard).
- Awareness of constraints and possibilities: The tutor knows that the lack of body language makes the use of certain teaching devices, (e.g., miming), difficult if not impossible. S/he also makes the best use of the multimodality of the medium by combining text chat with audio (e.g., for giving simultaneous written feedback without interrupting the student's oral contribution).
- Online socialization: The tutor agrees on a ''netiquette'' for the virtual classroom with the students and encourages them to follow it (e.g., by asking them to ''raise their hand'' before speaking). S/he is aware that more effort is needed to create a sense of ''presence'' or ''community'' online and will encourage students to share responsibility for their virtual space and disclose personal information.
- Facilitating communicative competence: The tutor is aware of communicative principles from teaching in a classroom situation and can adapt those to online or ''virtual'' groups. For example, rather than inviting students to take turns verbally, the tutor could introduce the rule that students speak as soon as the previous speaker has finished. Tutors can also encourage students who find it difficult to speak to make more use of the text chat or other modes of communication.
- Creativity, choice/selection: Obviously, creativity will play a strong role in designing activities, but also in the choice and selection of pre-prepared activities.

They can be used as designed or the tutor can adapt or replace them with her/his own creations. Creativity is not limited to materials, and tutors can also find new uses for online tools. In Lyceum, for example, the ''yes'' button (originally intended for voting) is often used to signal consent to a verbal statement.

- Development of own style: Tutors can find the use of online media in teaching languages limiting at first, due to the lack of body language and the resulting restrictions to their ''own style'' developed in face-to-face settings. With increasing familiarity with the medium and growing confidence on lower skill levels, tutors can find their own style of teaching re-emerging. For example, one tutor who took part in our training found that as the course progressed, his increased sense of security in using the medium and the strengthened cohesion in his group allowed him to release control to the students. They would engage in ''tidying'' the whiteboard, moving images or text-chunks and even gather the whole class to a different view or module.

Online pedagogy is not something completely new and mysterious for language teachers; some of the problems encountered are exactly the same or parallel to those in face-to-face classes (e.g., getting students to talk). Nevertheless, some of the problems need different solutions and it is therefore important to pay attention to the training needs of online language tutors in particular. As a start, enhancing tutors' awareness of the differences between face-to-face and online teaching—above a purely technical level—will make it easier for them to *demand* training and development in this area.

Design and Implementation of a Tutor Training Programme

This section is based on the development of one particular training programme for online tutors on a German Beginners' course at the Open University.[7] Students had a choice of tutorial mode, and the online tutorials where presented twice a month via the Open University's own audio-graphic conferencing software, Lyceum.

The lowest level of the pyramid—basic ICT competence—could be taken as a given for our tutors as they were self-selected and opted to teach on the online course. The programme started with tutors working individually through an animated online tutorial, which they had received with the software, thus introducing them to specific technical skills needed for Lyceum. A tutor briefing day was the second part in the training programme, developing further tutors' specific technical competence. It also raised their awareness of the possibilities and constraints of the electronic medium as compared to face-to-face teaching and of the implications this has for teaching a language online. This was achieved through a discussion between face-to-face and online tutors. In addition, the briefing addressed ways of fostering a community feeling in the group in order for the next skill, the facilitation of a communicative approach to language learning, to take effect.

The third part of the training programme consisted of two pre-course training workshops online, thus emphasizing the importance of conducting training in the

medium used for teaching (see, for example, Bennett & Marsh, 2002, p. 18; Kearsley, 2000, p. 91). The first session reinforced the use of Lyceum tools, that is, the voicebox, whiteboards, concept maps, documents, and text chat. The second session focused on pedagogic issues through a simulation of tutorial tasks, with tutors taking the place of learners. Feedback on all training aspects was collected from tutors via questionnaires, interviews, and informal email contact. This has helped us to refine the described suggestions for implementation of training online tutors below. Following the skills pyramid developed earlier, the training needs of online tutors can be seen as building on one another, with the tutors reaching more competence and, at the same time, becoming more specialized.

In the first instance, it would be hoped that online tutors are always self-selected, that is, that they have a choice between teaching a course online and face-to-face. This self-selection should ensure that the tutors have an interest in technology for language teaching, and motivation, curiosity, and the willingness to engage with the medium. Choosing to enter a new area of teaching also strongly suggests that these tutors are willing to further develop their teaching skills. If the selection process has taken into account basic ICT literacy as a prerequisite, the first stage of training that is necessary for new online tutors will be to become familiar with the required software. It is in every institution's interest to train tutors sufficiently to use applications necessary for their courses, and this training need is, indeed, rarely neglected. However, as we have seen, it is not sufficient to train tutors in the technical use of an online tool.

On preparing tutors for the next stage—the awareness of the constraints and affordances of the medium—a balance has to be achieved. If there is a choice between trainers, it would be wise to avoid the over-enthusiastic software developer, who only sees the benefits, and the over-critical staff trainer, who believes that the "traditional way" is best. An up-front account of benefits and challenges of the medium with respect to online interaction in a language classroom will allow tutors to make up their own mind and avoid later disappointment.

Training for online tutors should, in our opinion, also make explicit the need for incorporating socialization techniques for online groups. As a first step, taking on the role of an online learner during training events conducted in the medium can help the future tutors to become more aware of the need for building an online community. Training in an online medium also brings to the foreground the importance of establishing a "netiquette" for their groups, and different forms of netiquette should be discussed. Most importantly, tutors are encouraged to think about the need for explicit community forming activities (e.g., warm-ups) and strategies (e.g., encouraging "study buddies") before the start of their own course.

Facilitating communicative competence will be easier within a successful online community but, nevertheless, needs to be made an explicit goal of the training. Tutors need to be more aware of students' opportunities to engage in communication during online interaction and identify ways of facilitating students' participation and increasing students' actual language production. One way of achieving this is by creating and adapting communicative language tasks to the online medium, which leads on to the next level: creativity and choice.

Trying to achieve the two highest levels of the skills pyramid—employing choice and creativity and the chance to develop an individual teaching style—within initial training for online tutors might put too much pressure on the trainees, and rather than helping them might make them too self-conscious in their effort of using too many skills at the same time. Instead, these levels are more likely to be the result of experience and further training. This also shows that developing online teaching skills takes time and has to have solid foundations to be successful.

Beyond initial pre-course training, there are three main sources for support and continuing development available for online tutors:

1. research in online education and technology-enhanced second language teaching;
2. the exchange of experience, ideas, and opinions with their peers who are using the same or comparable software; and
3. their own reflective practice in online tuition.

The first option, research, is ideal for a limited number of language tutors who are also involved in action research. Many other tutors manage to stay abreast of research in their immediate area by investing their own time; however, this can certainly be made easier for a great number of tutors through institutional provision of ''digests'' and staff development events.

A second staff development option, peer exchange and peer mentoring, was identified as a valuable resource in the literature (Barker, 2002, p. 10) and confirmed by our experience. Several of our tutors identified continued peer support or a mentoring system with more experienced colleagues helping novices as desirable. One way of facilitating exchanges between tutors is the use of asynchronous written conferences or dedicated web space. In theory, this kind of ongoing training and development should be ideal where a critical number of tutors are engaged in comparable work with comparable software. All too often, however, peer exchange tends to be used for troubleshooting, looking for particular answers to a problem rather than disseminating good practice up front.

To encourage useful and ongoing peer-exchange, some work needs to be invested beforehand: for example, opportunities to meet colleagues and peers (face-to-face, if desired); media conducive to free and open exchanges between peers (preferably un-moderated); media which allow the exchange of materials as well as text (e.g., shared websites, blogs); a stimulus to start a discussion on relevant topics; an ongoing evaluation of the benefits of continued peer-exchange. Clearly, some of these need to be planned and provided by the institution offering online tuition if it wishes to ensure that its tutors will carry on delivering the best quality teaching.

The third option identified for continuing staff development is reflective practice, that is, continuous self-observation and self-evaluation. It can be used by tutors to help them understand their own teaching and to share this understanding with others in order to identify and implement changes. According to Florez (2001), the benefits of reflective practice are its flexibility, practicality, professionalism, and sustainability.

Language tutors in higher education are thus encouraged to develop as ''reflective practitioners rather than technical experts'' (Arthur & Hurd, 2001, p. 189), using different ways of achieving this, such as working with others, self-evaluation, peer observation and even tutor-led classroom research (Althauser & Matuga, 1998, p. 207). However, reflective practice also brings challenges as it requires a commitment to continuous self-development, needs time and training, and if it is done properly, can make practitioners question underlying fundamental values and assumptions.

Conclusion

Training and ongoing staff development will always be desirable in education, especially in an environment that changes as fast as online teaching. Over and above the ''normal'' necessities of staff development in technical skills, however, online tutors must also be prepared to change and adapt their teaching style according to new developments and findings in the pedagogy of online language teaching.

Institutions offering online courses would be in serious error if they underestimated the investment that needs to be made into training and continuing development as well as research into online teaching. If institutions want to offer quality online courses, they have to ensure that they train their tutors in basic ICT use, software-specific application, and the affordances of the medium. Training should also address online socialization of communities of learners and the languages specific need for facilitating communicative competence. Especially in these areas more research is required.

This research should be focused not solely on the medium but also on the messenger, not only on software development, but also on the staff delivering tuition online. An American study (Dupin-Bryant, 2004) has recently shown that despite the research constantly reaffirming the benefits of student-centred teaching modes for distance learners, tutors using interactive television as a medium for distance teaching are still predominantly committed to a teacher-centred style of tuition—a danger already identified 15 years previously (Mason & Kaye, 1990).

The onus, therefore, is on the institution to assure that findings on best practice are indeed reaching those who need to be aware of them. This can be achieved by conducting research into tutor attitudes and teaching styles, tutors' use of the online media and tutors' awareness of the different interaction patterns of online and face-to-face communication, to name but a few of the areas where further investigation would benefit the development of best practice in online tuition.

However, this article will have made it clear that training and development of online tutors is not merely an institutional task but needs to be fully endorsed by the tutors to be successful. A large part of the personal development work will have to be done by tutors themselves. From the continuous updating of technical skills to creatively working with the virtual environment, tutors will have to invest their own time and effort. Whereas institutional support and guidance can be clearly structured and delivered, more personal engagement is needed in order to develop higher-level skills after initial training. Reflective practice, for example, clearly cannot function without the full support of the individual tutors. Peer exchanges and peer mentoring can only provide

valuable information if knowledgeable tutors are willing to share their experience freely and openly, and if all tutors remain committed to change and flexibility.

It will therefore be a joint effort of institution and individual that can bring online tutor training one step further from "coping with difficulties" to the development of a truly original online pedagogy for language teaching.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. "The principal reason why supplemental learning experiences in virtual classrooms are still used only rarely is, in my opinion, that teachers and trainers lack adequate training and experience in dealing with this kind of learning. This calls for action by universities and experts in continuing professional development for teachers" (own translation).
2. Similar to Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1987/1954).
3. Two decades ago, educators writing about instructional technology still found it necessary to include basic information on what a computer is, never mind expecting every teacher to be able to use one.
4. For a non-language specific account of creating online communities, see Salmon (2003).
5. Some educators avoid the question of online socialization, advising tutors to supplement online socialization with face-to-face meetings, for example, at the beginning of the course (Felix, 1998; Nicol, Minty, & Sinclair, 2003; Warschauer, 1996). This is obviously not possible for all distance learning courses, therefore more skill will be needed in *online* socialization.
6. Imagine, for example, a traditional grammar translation class, where its tutors might well see being able to "socialize" as a desirable but not as a necessary condition for the success of their teaching. Proponents of the information transmission model of teaching might well argue that individual learners benefit from a class without the need for collaboration or even "meeting" their fellow students.
7. As mentioned above, a case study with details of tutor training and feedback will be published separately.

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