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Conference or Workshop Item

How to cite:

Baumann, Uwe; Shelley, Monica; Murphy, Linda and White, Cynthia (2006). Language tutors at the OUUK – their (e)-competencies in Open and Distance Learning. In: EDEN 2006 Annual Conference, 14-17 Jun 2006, Vienna, Austria.

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LANGUAGE TUTORS AT THE OUUK – THEIR (E)- COMPETENCIES IN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING

Uwe Baumann, The Open University, UK
Monica Shelley, The Open University, UK
Linda Murphy, The Open University, UK
Cynthia White, Massey University, New Zealand

Abstract

The OUUK has been teaching distance courses in languages for more than ten years. Students learn by means of specially-designed course materials, increasingly web-based resources and through direct interaction with tutors, who provide personalised feedback on the students' assignments as well as offering tutorials for communicative practice. The role of OUUK tutors embraces, however, more than just teaching and giving feedback. They play a central role in supporting students in every aspect of their learning, forming the interface between the institution and the learner. The importance of the tutor role in ODL in general has been the subject of some informative research, but much less has been written about the skills needed by tutors of languages at a distance. This international research project has been set up to address this shortfall, and to gather evidence and insights into this particular role. The project aims to investigate the skills, attributes and (e-)competencies required by language tutors of whom a substantial number deliver the tuition online. Initially, a selected group of OUUK language tutors generated what they perceived to be the knowledge, skills and attributes necessary to carry out this complex and demanding role which included the requisite skills for online tuition delivery. In the next stage the outcomes they had produced were refined and regrouped by the researchers. In the third stage a wider sample of tutors commented and added to the listings. This paper will report on the findings so far and summarise the next stages which are planned.

Background

The Department of Languages (previously the Centre for Modern Languages) at the Open University, UK (OUUK) was founded in the early 1990s. It now offers courses in French, German and Spanish from beginners' to graduate level, a degree in Modern Language Studies and its courses can count towards a variety of other named degrees in the OUUK, such as Humanities, European Studies and International Studies. Initiatives to widen the curriculum by the introduction of Italian for beginners and English Language Teaching are under way. There are currently (2006) around 7600 students registered on the language courses. The courses include continuous assessment and either end-of-course assessments or examinations.

The courses follow the open and distance learning model of supported self-study with specially designed core study course materials; audiovisual materials (for the new generation of courses currently under development these materials are delivered as interactive DVD-ROMs) and other supplementary materials. The students have access to a wide variety of support services provided by the University, including on-line access to the library, designated course websites and e-mail conferences. More and more emphasis is being placed on the availability of different formats: for instance, the new language courses offer the course books as e-books online as standard. Similarly, it is anticipated that language courses will make full use of the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) that is currently being developed at the University. Students are offered around 21 hours of non-compulsory tuition throughout the academic year, delivered either face-to-face or on-line via a computer-mediated audio-graphic conferencing system called Lyceum, which has been developed in-house. This system allows for real-time oral communication from networked computers. Tuition offers students the opportunity to practise interactive speaking and

to engage in group activities. Each student is assigned to a dedicated personal tutor (Associate Lecturer).

The role of the tutor

Tutors at the OUUK have an important role to play as the interface between the university and the students, providing cognitive, affective and systemic support. They are the first point of contact for students regarding any academic and course-related issues; they deliver tuition in their role as learning facilitator in either face-to-face or online mode; they mark assignments and provide written and spoken personalized feedback to the learners and generally support and encourage students offering advice and help. In short, they provide a human face (Tait, J., 2004:102) and a personal touch to a large and complex organization.

Despite the perceived importance of the tutor role, very little research has been undertaken that relates to tutoring at a distance

While there has [...] appeared a substantial literature on methodologies relating to the production of learning materials and resources for open and distance learning (ODL), relatively little has been written about the planning and management of student support. (Tait, A, 2000:287)

There are various possible explanations for this relative paucity of research. There is, for example, the notion in academia that teaching is less prestigious than research and this appears to be equally applicable in distance education (Lentell, 2003:64). She emphasizes the fact that tutors are the unheard voices of distance education (Lentell, 1994) and that they are generally undervalued (Lentell, 2003).

Tutoring tends to be the less visible element of ODL, but is no less essential than good materials and effective administration. Distance education cannot exist without tutors who provide feedback and guidance to students. (Lentell & O'Rourke, 2004)

The OUUK's model of ODL is based on course materials being produced by academic staff, certain aspects of the student support system being facilitated by regional academic staff and the actual delivery being undertaken by a large pool of part-time tutoring staff (Tait, J., 2002). Tait argues that undervaluing tutors makes it difficult to develop effective channels of communication between the tutor's experience of teaching and the design of courses (Tait, J., 2002:156). There is an emerging consensus that the role of the tutor as the interface between the learners and the institution is gaining importance because

[the tutors'] feedback forms a crucial link between course designers and student learning outcomes and, because of the model of student learning that underpins UKOU course design and student support, feedback aims to build a relationship and a sense of contact between the student and the tutor. (Tait, J., 2004:99)

Institutional research at the OUUK has demonstrated that students at the University rate the continuous assessment and its marking by tutors as 'very helpful' (see Tait, J., 2004: 100). This view is supported by the recent publication of a national student satisfaction survey (see Teaching Quality Information, 2005) which rated the overall satisfaction of OUUK students as very high; languages at the OUUK were among those subjects which were rated highly.

While there is some, albeit limited, research available on the role of the tutor in ODL, there is even less research which focuses directly onto the role of the distance language tutor. Although

there is some peripheral evidence on feedback from tutors for example (Ros i Sole & Truman, 2005), this is an area which has received very little attention.

Tutoring online

With the increasing emphasis on supported open and distance e-learning, there are new demands and challenges for tutors. Computer literacy and access to computing facilities (including e-mail, conferencing and Internet) have become a prerequisite for many OUUK tutors, including those who tutor languages. The Department of Languages has pioneered the use of audio-graphic computer conferencing since 1997, and now, in 2006, almost all the language courses offer optional online tuition. This new form of tuition has meant that the established pedagogical principles of teaching languages needed to be adapted to the new environment (see Hampel & Hauck, 2004; Hampel, in press). Tutors working on such courses required considerable training to familiarise themselves with the new environment and be able to teach successfully using this medium. Despite the wealth of materials and the increase in online courses, it has been noted that 'there is still a dearth of high quality training to teach online' (Hampel & Stickler, 2005:311) and, indeed, 'less knowledge about the skills that tutors need' (Hampel & Stickler, 2005:316). Online tutors need to develop 'electronic literacy' (Warschauer, 1999:11) just as learners do. They have to be able to fulfil a variety of roles as tutors in an online environment:

'the role of the tutor is no longer that of an instructor and a transmitter of knowledge. Instead, as well as facilitating the communication between the learners, the tutor guides the learners through the tasks, moderates and, in addition, acts as a participant in the learning process.' (Hauck & Hampel, 2005:270).

The research project

This ongoing research project, based on collaboration between academics at the OUUK and Massey University in New Zealand, aims to

- articulate the professional background and expertise which are required of distance language teaching professionals
- gain insights into the nature of the professional practice in the field
- gather evidence for an under-researched area of international significance and relevance
- provide a basis for future professional development.

The study developed around an unfolding research design (White et al., 2005) which facilitates the inclusion of different perspectives from a variety of participants working in various roles: as course designers and writers, as regional academics who are responsible for the management of important aspects of student support and who deal directly with tutors, and the tutors themselves. The project is of a cyclical progressive nature and is taking in several stages.

Phase One involved tutors from one of the thirteen OUUK regions who deliver courses in German, French and Spanish. They met in groups to consider what they regarded as the knowledge, skills and attitudes required to fulfil their roles, using a brain-storming technique. Tutors responded first individually and then discussed the findings in groups.

The initial findings were analysed by the project team, classified and refined to remove some overlap and repetition. Additionally, the findings were supplemented by referring to relevant literature and drawing on the professional expertise of the project team, since one area, ICT for learning at a distance, had drawn very few comments from the tutors and needed to be expanded. Eight broad categories were identified.

The project team had some concerns that the lists of statements appeared largely decontextualised and codified, providing little indication of the interpretation or significance of each item. Therefore Phase Two involved asking the tutors to reflect on the importance of the statements. This was done via open-ended questionnaires to allow for the exploration of the tutors' personal understandings of the attributes and expertise which underpin tutoring. An indirect technique was employed to elicit full responses: the yoked subject technique (White, 1994) where tutors were asked to select and elaborate on statements which they considered particularly important in distance language teaching, as if they were talking to a new tutor.

The data from the questionnaires were analysed and as a result, the listings of statements within the eight categories underwent substantial revision and streamlining in response to the feedback from tutors.

Phase three of the research project

This stage of the project offered around twenty tutors the opportunity to take part in group discussions about the statements. Three sessions of discussion groups were held, recorded and transcribed. Participants were asked to comment on the list of statements, responding to the broad categories and to individual items. In addition, the tutors were asked whether they felt there were general principles or belief systems (or maxims) which determined the way in which teachers perceived and prioritised the skills they needed to teach (see Richards, 1998). Richards explores the maxims which relate to the approach teachers in face-to-face classrooms take to dealing with their students:

...teachers' belief systems lead to the development of rational principles that serve as a source of how teachers interpret their responsibilities....These principles function like rules for best behaviour in that they guide the teachers' selection of choices from among a range of alternatives. Hence they function as maxims that guide the teachers' actions. (Richards, 1998:53-54)

General outcomes of the discussions

The list of statements generated animated debate in all groups, and helped these tutors with different levels of experience in teaching languages at a distance to explore their roles in a way for which they do not normally have either time or opportunity. One theme which emerged from each of the three groups was the difference between face-to-face and distance teaching. The vast majority of OU languages tutors have experienced both and this is an important discussion, especially for those relatively new to teaching at a distance,

It's a unique role, because in the classroom it's very much hands on, you're there, they're in front of you, they can consult you all through the lesson, on almost a day-to-day basis, whereas with something like this, it's much more hands off...they might be hundreds of miles away from you, so they've got to work by themselves to a large extent and we've got to work out how to help them.

The implications of distance for dealing with students were highlighted:

What I'd focus on, the encouraging...because we've got to look at the potential isolation of the OU students,....sitting there at home and wondering and worrying. So I think what I would really focus on out of all of this, what sets a distance learning tutor apart? It would be the support.

All these points could, of course, be raised by any distance teacher dealing with students who they may never see. The participants identified particular challenges arising from teaching languages at a distance.

One of them was how to deal with correcting students' work:

If I correct someone who actually comes to class, I may do it differently, I may not actually correct everything, because in a class I may decide to put a point on the board for everybody...but [for distance students] I personally correct every single mistake.

Another issue which can be a problem with these classes of adult language learners are mixed ability and learning needs and wishes.

I know, for instance, that I might have one or two students who are really keen on an in-depth explanation of grammar and love it to bits but I also have some who will be completely overwhelmed if I start talking about direct or indirect objects or whatever it is so I've got to make sure that I don't scare the ones who are not very grammar oriented off completely, but do enough so the others are satisfied and don't feel, oh what a waste of time. So it has to be balanced depending on who you are working with at the time.

Maxims

While the tutors were keen to talk about the statements on particular skills that distance language tutors need, they found thinking about the maxims that might lie behind those skills more difficult to discuss. The maxims which were suggested (White et al, 2005) were empowerment, appropriateness, honesty and openness, and the tutors felt that these wider concepts subsumed the specific skills and attitudes they used in their work. One tutor, however, came up with a fifth maxim, humility.

I mean humility of the tutor in the face of a student who is, after all, an intelligent human being perhaps with more intelligence and experience of the world than you have, so listen to the student, be prepared to learn from the student in some ways and really respect what they're doing.

E-tutoring

Tutors found it challenging to transfer face-to-face qualities to online tuition.

'I think that IT and email is fine, you can send them the materials and tell them things but nothing can replace the human voice, the friendliness and the personality and the warmth of knowing there is a real person – well, they know, anyway – but the human voice does give, I think, a warmth and encouragement that...well, perhaps we'll learn it one day with IT, it must be a skill that you can attain that way.'

The tutors saw clear advantages of the Lyceum online mode and demonstrated as well a change in attitudes and beliefs about tutoring.

'It's very good for them [students] because no matter where they are, or how isolated they are, they can talk to people through it, they can hear voices, and it's very much an isolation breakdown and, I can tell you, I wouldn't have said this two years ago!'

'If you can't have face to face it's the next best thing.'

'And you can do it any time, it's flexible, you can do it from your own home, you can contact people, you don't have to come into a centre like this disrupting your work schedule, disrupting your family schedule.'

'You can pass on enthusiasm in Lyceum, because in Lyceum you can actually type and speak...'

A further challenge for tutors teaching languages online emerged as the problem for students with poor IT skills.

'They find it very difficult to concentrate on the skills involved in the use of Lyceum and using their language skills as well. So basically I can see two things they need. They need more training with the use of Lyceum so they can feel more at ease with it and another point is that we ought to try to encourage them ideally, when we are using Lyceum, to just use that means to meet each other.'

Using Lyceum required the development of particular communication skills.

The Lyceum aspect that's particularly interesting for me...I particularly find that very difficult on Lyceum delivery on a course because you know you're not going to see them. So you have to right from the beginning try to find a way to be friendly – to be, you know, encouraging, approachable and all that.'

Online tuition and the availability of the platform at all times meant that there were new possibilities for self-help

'Self-help doesn't really mean you have to be there next to the person. They have got IT skills as well so even if it is not Lyceum, exchanging telephone numbers, setting up a five minute conversation once a week or writing emails to each other....'

Discussion of results

The findings so far indicate clearly that the approach chosen to research this new area has been successful, since it allows for flexibility and high level of stakeholder involvement. The research design has been successful in involving tutors, giving them a voice and offering them the opportunity to articulate their professional beliefs and attributes in the context of teaching languages at a distance at the OUUK. By emphasizing the direct involvement of the tutors, the perceived undervaluing of tutors, as described by Tait and Lentell, has been counterbalanced. The research has been both qualitative and quantitative, and has yielded a wealth of data.

More specifically, in Phase One a substantial amount of raw data was collected from tutors which covered almost all aspects of tutoring a language at a distance. This data was essential since it provided the basis for the categorisation that formed the backbone of the research project.

Phase Two provided prioritisation and refocusing of the statements generated in Phase One. The use of the yoked subject technique facilitated the free expression of views, thus building on, and expanding the original statements, linking them to practice and relevant literature about tutor beliefs and attributes.

Phase Three provided an opportunity to enlarge on the most important aspects of the tutors' work and to consider the possibility of what lay behind their responses – the maxims. Given a free choice as to the areas they concentrated on, they gravitated to the discussion of the issues arising from teaching at a distance, rather than the more specific ones of teaching languages in this way. However, they were aware of the context and background to their discussion, often giving examples and explanations based on their language teaching. These tutors' comments indicate clearly that they were aware of the need to develop students' cognitive skills, support the affective aspects of language learning and contribute to a systemic approach to study.

The particular challenges of tutoring online were seen to be the lack of visual support and body language; there was recognition that online tutoring needs different skills from classroom teaching and the flexibility of this mode of tuition was acknowledged.

Conclusion

This project is open-ended and has concentrated thus far on the tutors. It has been successful in eliciting detailed and constructive responses from previously undervalued practitioners teaching

languages at a distance with the OUUK, offering them the opportunity to reflect on their practice and value their skills, knowledge and expertise in this field. More specifically, it has generated a substantial body of raw data which have been processed and condensed into eight different categories with a number of statements for each. Evidence from this work supports the claim for the need for tailored training to enable tutors to become e-literate and fulfil the potential of the medium

The project will now be extended to include almost all OUUK language tutors, who have been circulated with the list of statements and invited to comment on them. These tutors work across the UK and, in some instances, the rest of Europe.

It is also planned to carry out a series of interviews with tutors of languages at a distance in other parts of Europe and elsewhere, so as to gain an overview of other contexts, teaching systems and language groups. These interviews will serve as a basis for case studies, adding another dimension to the research. A similar series of interviews with those who write and produce distance education materials, as well as with students of languages at a distance is also planned.

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Contact details: Uwe Baumann, Department of Languages, Faculty of Education and Language Studies, The Open University, Stuart Hall Building, Walton Hall, Milton Keynes, MK7 6AA, Great Britain
 e-mail: U.Baumann@open.ac.uk