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Training teachers for the multimedia age: developing teacher expertise to enhance online learner interaction and collaboration

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Abstract

This paper considers the skills that enable teachers to foster interaction and collaboration in online language learning. Drawing on Hampel and Stickler's (2005) skills pyramid for online language learning and teaching, it presents the pre-service and in-service training programme that Associate Lecturers in the Department of Languages at the Open University undergo in the context of teaching languages with the help of online communication tools. Two projects are presented that shed more light on the expertise required to teach languages in complex virtual learning environments. The first project highlights the skills that are needed to teach in a complex online environment; the second one presents a teacher training study which aimed to find out more about distance teachers' experience of facilitating online group work, identify development needs, try out the potential of particular asynchronous and synchronous tools to support collaborative learning, and trial possible development activities. The paper concludes by describing the kind of training programme that tutors require in order to acquire the skills identified.

Keywords: online environments; VLE; collaboration; language learning; teacher training

1 Introduction

A report on a Europe-wide survey on the impact of ICT in teaching and learning foreign languages (commissioned in 2002 by the European Community Directorate General of Education and Culture) argued that a

a 'shift of paradigm' is necessary in teacher / learner roles. Co-operative, collaborative procedures are called for to harness the wide range of possibilities the new media offer. Teachers are called upon to abandon traditional roles and act more as guides and mentors (Fitzpatrick and Davies 2003, 4).

Indeed, over the past years such a shift in education from a transmission approach to a more learner-centred approach has been taking place, a shift that in computer-assisted language learning (CALL) is reflected, for example, by a move from using the computer as a grammar teaching tool to computer-mediated communication (CMC) between students and between students and teachers. This has also had an impact on teacher training. As Blake (2007) shows in a recent article, teacher training has become one of the new and growing themes in CALL research; this collection and the preceding symposium at AILA also bear witness to this. Two of the most pressing questions that are currently being discussed are what the skills are that language tutors require when teaching online, and how these skills can be developed through training.

This contribution is informed by a sociocultural framework of learning that emphasizes collaboration and construction of knowledge in the classroom (Vygotsky 1978; Warschauer 1997) and takes into account the mediating role of a number of factors such as teacher and peers, setting, language, and technology (Lantolf 2000). In the context of language education this translates into a focus on interaction and meaning (while not neglecting form, see Klapper 2003; Murphy 2005), and acknowledgement that the online context requires the consideration of the mediating effects of digital and multimodal tools (Hampel and Hauck 2006; Lamy and Hampel 2007). Therefore, the supposition in this article is that teachers need to take account of a number of aspects when using online technologies to support interaction and collaboration, aspects which include the following:

- Using the affordances of multimodal technologies;
- Addressing social and affective factors such as community building in 'disembodied' computer-based environments;
- Encouraging learner autonomy;
- Designing tasks appropriate to the online environment.

At the same time, this article and the studies that are presented in it are in accordance with Hubbard and Levy's (2006, ix) observations about teacher training in CALL, observations that recur throughout their book, namely 'the need for both technical and pedagogical training in CALL, ideally integrated with one another', and 'the idea of using CALL to learn about CALL – experiencing educational applications of technology firsthand as a student to learn how to use technology as a teacher'.

After considering some of the central principles of language learning, namely interaction and collaboration, and the accompanying skills that teachers need to draw on to foster interaction and collaboration in learners, the article will concentrate on two areas. On the one hand, it will present the training programme that Associate Lecturers in the Department of Languages at the Open University undergo in the context of teaching languages at a distance in general and of using different online communication tools for tutoring in particular. The programme integrates pre-service and in-service teacher training, thus following Meskill et al.'s (2006, 283-284) assertion: 'Effective integration [of technology into everyday teaching and learning in ways that are supportive of learning] after all is a complex, situated activity. What educators need to know when it comes to effective integration is in large part developed experientially in real institutional contexts.'

On the other hand, the chapter will report on two recent studies that have recently been undertaken to inform a new generation of blended language courses at the Open University. These studies afford insights into the skills needed to teach in

complex virtual learning environments that comprise a variety of synchronous and asynchronous tools as well as identifying training needs. The article will conclude by considering how these training and support needs of tutors can be met. While the studies were carried out in a distance education setting, the findings are of relevance for teacher education more widely. As White (2006, 259) points out, the 'rapid emergence of blended, distributed and other hybrid learning environments means that the boundaries between distance education and conventional education are fading as more and more teachers move parts of their curriculum and learning tasks to the Web.'

2 Interaction and collaboration

As early as 1990 Harasim linked collaborative learning to online learning, believing that attributes of the online environment such as many-to-many communication or time independence would help 'to explore the capabilities of online systems for facilitating educational collaboration and enhancing human thinking' (1990, 40). The development of web 2.0 tools in recent years has made these systems not only more multimodal and diverse but also easier to access and almost ubiquitous – not just for a small elite but for a large part of the general population (at least in developed countries). As a result, teachers are increasingly relying on tools such as audio and video conferencing, virtual worlds, wikis or blogs for interaction with and amongst their students and for creating collaborative learning environments, thus providing learners with a platform to exchange with peers and reflect on their work, and to foster learner autonomy and learning strategies (e.g. Batardière & Jeanneau 2006; Engstrom & Jewett 2005; Wang 2007).

While the importance of collaborative learning has been recognized as a crucial element of new literacy (Richardson 2006) and a whole research area has developed around more general computer-supported collaborative learning (CSCL) – with its own *International Journal of CSCL* – most of the research carried out in this context has focused on written environments and only little work has been done in the field of language learning. Although interaction has been heralded as a central principle in mainstream second language acquisition and in sociocultural approaches to language education, collaboration, in contrast, has not attracted much critical attention. This is despite collaboration being a principal form of interaction – one that can potentially develop not only learners' linguistic skills but also their sense of community and their higher order critical inquiry (Hopkins et al. 2008). The only exception to this lack of engagement in terms of research is a recent concentration on so-called telecollaboration (e.g. O'Dowd 2006), an area which, however, is rather

specialized and focuses on collaborative activities that bring together language learners from different institutions in different countries and that usually take an intercultural perspective. Yet the scope of collaborative language learning as facilitated by the development of online collaborative CMC tools is much wider and also encompasses learners within one class working together. As a result, a number of researchers have called for increased research on collaborative language learning (e.g. Donato 2004; Mangenot and Nissen 2006; Lamy and Hampel 2007).

It is relatively easy to compile a list of potential academic, social and psychological benefits of collaborative learning (Panitz 2001). Yet for this type of learning to be successful, a number of critical factors relating to institutional set-up as well as to the role of the teacher and the experience and expectations of the students have to be considered. In order to work collaboratively, students, for example, need to possess (or develop) sufficient individual autonomy as well as group autonomy. This latter type of autonomy has been defined as 'the capacity of a group to manage itself on three levels: a socioaffective level (getting along with the others), a sociocognitive level (resolving problems together), and an organizational level (planning, monitoring, and evaluating work)' (Mangenot and Nissen 2006, 604). As has been shown by Mangenot and Nissen (2006) in their investigation of an online language course, collaborative settings or a collaborative course design do not guarantee collaboration. They found that while the guidelines of the course they were investigating insisted on interaction and collaboration between students (i.e. discussing their interpretation of documents, exchanging their ideas for an essay outline, and checking coherence between drafts) there was little actual negotiation of meaning.

One of Mangenot and Nissen's findings relates to the importance of the role of the tutor who needs to monitor the learners and help them develop collaborative skills especially at the sociocognitive level. Other researchers confirm this crucial role of the teacher. So Belz's (2003, 92) statement in relation to Internet-mediated intercultural foreign language education – 'the importance (but not necessarily the prominence) of the teacher and, ultimately, teacher education programs [...] increases rather than diminishes [...] precisely because of the electronic nature of the discourse' – can also be applied more widely to other Internet-mediated foreign language education, especially in distance contexts.

Yet not all tutors possess the skills to foster collaborative learning. Engstrom and Jewitt (2005, 14–15), for example, found that the teachers in their project were not very practiced in prompting students' critical thinking through the use of information literacy skills. Another common problem can be knowing when and how

to intervene, encouraging learners to interact and collaborate (Mangenot and Nissen 2006, 616). Student expectations play a role too – in Western culture great emphasis is placed on individual rather than collaborative activity. Last but not least, institutional policies can create obstacles – for example, the insistence in many institutions on individual assessment rather than on work done collaboratively. In order to overcome these hurdles, institutions would have to rethink their pedagogical approaches, consider the benefits of collaborative learning, and ensure that teachers receive support to develop the necessary skills on the ground.

3 Tutor skills

So what do online teaching skills actually encompass? In what ways are they distinct from the skills that face-to-face language teachers should possess? On the basis of an online tutor training programme that was carried out at the Open University, Hampel and Stickler (2005) identified a number of skills that they presented in the form of a pyramid (see Illustration 1). The pyramid is based on the idea that online language teachers need a range of skills that build on one another, skills that comprise both technical expertise and the pedagogical expertise of using this technology. This is in line with Hubbard and Levy (2006, 10) who also point to the importance of both '*technical* knowledge and skills that are necessary for the competent operation of the computer technology, and *pedagogical* knowledge and skills involving the computer technology's impact on a learning environment and its appropriate and effective integration into the teaching and learning process.'

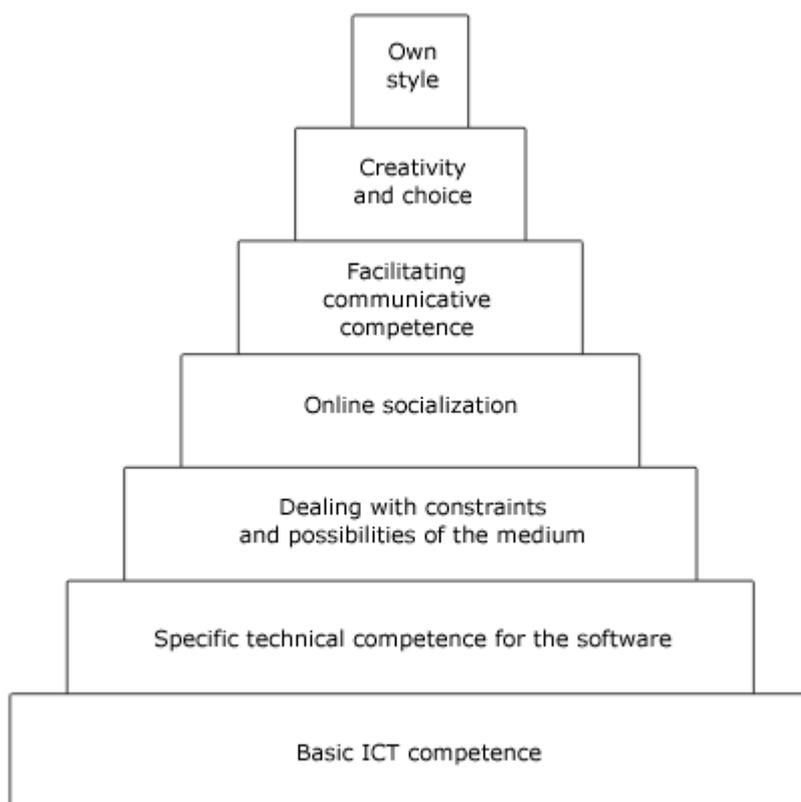


Illustration 1: Pyramid of skills (Hampel and Stickler 2005, 317; see also Stickler and Hampel 2007)

This paper is not concerned with the technical competences that an online tutor needs (see e.g. Barker 2002) or with online teaching more generally (see e.g. Salmon 2003). Instead, it concentrates on the much less well researched skills that have to do with gauging the effects of technological mediation on language teaching and learning and using the potential of the online environment to enhance communication and collaborative interaction, thereby fostering language development. Although some of the skills and knowledge that an online language teacher should possess are similar to those of online teachers generally, language teaching does pose specific challenges, as an area where the message (i.e. the second language (L2) that is taught) is also the medium used to teach it (see Borg 2006). This has a number of consequences for learners that include the importance of communication, focus on form besides focus on meaning, having to do conceptually undemanding activities in terms of content at lower levels, potential increase in anxiety about working in a language one has not mastered yet, and use of L2 and of L1. So let us examine these skills more closely in the context of language learning and teaching.

Dealing with constraints and possibilities of the medium (level 3)

Beyond its technical features, each technology has particular affordances, that is, specific constraints and possibilities that impact on its use. So on the one hand, teachers need to be able to harness the potential of the medium for language learning by, for example, using synchronous text chat for rehearsing oral language (Weininger and Shield 2003). On the other hand, they should know how to deal with challenges such as the lack of body language in synchronous audio conferencing (and to a certain extent in videoconferencing), which can make turn-taking less straightforward than it is in face-to-face settings (Hampel 2007). This skill (and the next one) has a strong affective dimension as online tutors have to be able to deal with negative emotions (e.g. disappointment and frustration) as well as positive emotional states (e.g. high expectations of the possibilities of the new media). It also involves the cognitive appraisal of emotional antecedents (Bown and White in press). This would include being able to acknowledge that certain things cannot be done in a particular environment and being able to make up for this in other ways.

Online socialization (level 4)

One particular constraint of CMC is the anonymity that can feature in online communication and the resulting lack of social presence that is often felt by students who solely meet at a distance in space as well as – in the case of asynchronous communication – in time. A number of socio-affective challenges can arise from this, including anxiety, lack of motivation, and difficulties in building a sense of community – all of which have been shown to impede successful communication and interaction (Lamy and Hampel 2007). Nevertheless, individuals can develop group cohesion and identity without having met in person, and teachers play a crucial role in this by, for example, integrating community building into online activities and helping to develop an online netiquette in the group.

Facilitating communicative competence (level 5)

This skill is particularly crucial for language tutors: the skill of making an online environment into a platform where interaction is fostered and communicative competence developed. In fact, collaboration is increasingly becoming part of communicative competence, especially when learners are remote. On the one hand, communicative competence is based on a sense of community and trust (see level 4); on the other hand, the teacher needs to facilitate **communication**, interaction and collaboration in an online environment through task design (Hampel 2006; Wang 2007) and a student-centred approach to teaching (Duensing, Stickler, Batstone and Heins 2006).

Creativity and choice (levels 6)

All language teachers – whether they be situated in face-to-face or in online teaching settings – have to possess creative skills. These include adapting authentic material, devising meaningful purposes for interaction, and choosing the right tool for the job, a tool that fits in with the task and the learners' cultures-of-use (Thorne 2003). Yet as Stickler and Hampel (no date) point out, 'the ability of an online tutor to choose amongst materials already available on the Web is different in scope, if not in quality, from the ability to choose the right exercise or the right text book.' Creative skills of an online tutor would include designing multimodal online activities which appeal to different types of learners and foster students' language skills, encouraging their creative use of the online environment as well as the ability to contribute to the context as created by participants in particular settings.

Own style (levels 7)

Based on the preceding skills, online teachers with time develop their own personal teaching style, thus realizing the potential of the technologies and materials used, encouraging their students to form learning communities, and using the resources creatively to promote student-centred communicative language learning. In this, social networking can have a big part to play, with the teacher linking online learning to social networking and participating in it.

In order to examine how these different skills can be taught in practice, the following section will present a specific training programme for teachers in a blended context as well as summarize the findings from two projects that can inform online training of language teachers.

4 Training tutors to teach online

4.1 Tutor training at the Open University

With the Open University being an institution specializing in distance education where most of the teaching is done through in-house produced course materials, the role of the tutor is different to that in more conventional universities (White et al. 2005). This role therefore includes the following core responsibilities:

- Mediation of in-house produced course materials
- Marking of assessment
- Synchronous tuition, either online using an audiographic conferencing system or face-to-face (old generation of language courses with two strands)
- Tuition following a blended approach with synchronous and asynchronous tools that are integrated in Moodle-based course websites as well as some face-to-face tutorials (new generation of language courses)
- Supporting students

In addition, tutors can take on additional activities if they wish to do so, for example, peer monitoring of assessment, mentoring of less experienced colleagues, contributing to the production of course materials, and supporting training activities.

Although each student only gets a maximum of 18–24 hours of (non-compulsory) tutor-led tuition per course (which, depending on the course, covers a period of 9–12 months), the role of the tutor is considered crucial by both the institution and by students to provide a human interface with the materials as well as the university. As a result, training plays a central role, and it is perhaps not surprising that students are happy with the support they receive from their tutors. This tends to be reflected in the annual course survey – for 2007, just over 90% of language students said that they were ‘very satisfied’ or ‘satisfied’ with this support in the ten courses surveyed.

Tutors new to the Open University tend to have limited experience in teaching at a distance as well as online and so training is designed and delivered in house. This is done by regional academics located in the Open University’s 14 regions who have line management responsibilities for the tutors, in conjunction with central faculty members located at the Open University’s campus in Milton Keynes whose role includes design, production and overall academic responsibility for the course in question. In Open University language courses (namely French, German, and Spanish at levels 1–3 (exit levels A2–C1 in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEF)), and Italian and Welsh (at beginners level), the number of tutors (and tutor groups) per course varies from 10 in small population courses to more than 60 in larger courses.

Table 1 gives an overview of the training stages that Open University tutors undergo and it maps the content against the pyramid of skills (see Section 3). For the purpose of this paper, I am focusing on the new generation of courses that follow a blended approach.

Training stages	Description	Online skills (see pyramid)
Tutor selection	Prerequisites: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Some basic experience ▪ Willingness to engage with electronic forms of distance teaching and support 	Basic ICT competence
Initial tutor training	<i>New courses:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Guidelines and ‘toolkits’ (e.g. 	Specific technical competence for the

	<p>for use of online tools, correspondence teaching etc.)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ National one-day f2f course induction event (includes introduction to course, hands-on exploration of tools, initial pedagogical guidance) ▪ Training sessions (online) <p><i>New tutors joining existing courses:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Guidelines and ‘toolkits’ ▪ Induction documents ▪ Training sessions (online) 	<p>software;</p> <p>dealing with constraints and possibilities of the medium</p>
Support through course design	<p>In-house developed material for self-study (‘tutorial-in-print’);</p> <p>Pre-prepared course websites containing:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ A number of communication tools (including tutor group-specific tools); ▪ Asynchronous interactive activities integrated into course; ▪ Bank of activities for synchronous interactive tutorials 	<p>Dealing with constraints and possibilities of the medium;</p> <p>online socialization;</p> <p>facilitating communicative competence</p>
Continuing support and staff development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Regional staff development events (general regional programme and course-specific programme), including ICT training and workshops; ▪ Peer mentoring by more experienced colleagues; ▪ Tutorial observation by regional academics and feedback; 	<p>Dealing with constraints and possibilities of the medium;</p> <p>online socialization;</p> <p>facilitating communicative competence;</p> <p>creativity and choice;</p> <p>own style</p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Sharing of experience through asynchronous tutor forum specific to a particular course; ▪ Sharing of materials through repository (under development) 	
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Table 1: Training and staff development for Open University language tutors

In addition, tutors are regularly invited to participate as volunteers in pilot studies whose purpose is twofold: to trial new approaches to distance teaching and the use of new software for language learning and teaching, and to inform future teacher training and support. This allows the tutors to develop new skills while the researchers can gauge learner experience, pilot activities, evaluate tools, and identify tutor skills needed.

The new generation of language courses at the Open University is characterized by a blended approach which combines more traditional distance teaching elements such as printed books with interactive DVD-ROMs and a virtual learning environment (VLE) that includes an array of activities and tools – from quizzes for self-study and individual web searches to self-reflective blogs, interactive forums, collaborative wikis, and interactive videoconferencing. Starting in 2009, the new level 2 German course entitled L203 Motive (a course at CEF exit level B2 which combines language with content, focusing on different aspects of contemporary Germany) is one of the first language courses where the VLE is integrated into the design of the new course right from the conception of the syllabus. Thus the course website alongside the Study Guide comprises the ‘spine’ of the course, and online activities (which make up approx. 20% of the course) complement the print and DVD-ROM materials and also feed into assessment. In terms of tutor training, the course is informed by previous training programmes offered to Open University language tutors, by research carried out on online tutor skills and training (see Hampel and Hauck 2004; Stickler and Hampel 2007) and by two recent projects specially conceived to aid the design of the course:

- (1) A VLE project on the use of online tools to enhance student interaction and collaboration
- (2) A study carried out jointly by the Open University and the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya on training tutors to foster collaborative language learning in the VLE

4.2 VLE project on the use of online tools

In order to trial the University's new Moodle-based VLE as well as a new videoconferencing tool (which at the time was being considered for cross-university implementation), a pilot was carried out in 2006–07. It was led by the author of this article and her colleague Ursula Stickler. 25 learners (CEF exit levels B1–B2) took part in the five-week online course facilitated by two tutors who had extensive experience teaching languages at the Open University, both face-to-face and via audiographic conferencing. The course included a Moodle-based course website (with resources and a study calendar), incorporating asynchronous tasks –including web searches and quizzes as well as communicative activities using the forum, the wiki and blogs – and synchronous tutorial sessions using the videoconferencing software FlashMeeting, a system developed in-house (which is also freely available, see <http://flashmeeting.open.ac.uk/home.html>).

Data were collected through pre- and post-course questionnaires, student interviews, a focus group with the two teachers and the task designer, Moodle logs, and recordings of the FlashMeeting sessions. Although this project focused more on the students' experience, it also allowed us to gain insights into tutor training, both in terms of finding out more about the skills needed to teach in such an online setting and of designing an appropriate training programme. A number of findings can be related directly to the skills pyramid (see section 3):

- Technical challenges of using new and still unfamiliar tools for teaching, e.g. blogs and synchronous videoconferencing system (level 2)
- Dealing with the constraints of the tools, e.g. FlashMeeting, which unlike the audio conferencing tool currently used in mainstream Open University courses does not offer separate sub-conferences for small group work (level 3)
- Making use of the possibilities of online tools for socialization, e.g. webcam video in FlashMeeting that allows users to see one another, or blogs to share personal information (levels 3 and 4)
- Need for ongoing regulation of emotion and affect when employing such new learning tools (levels 3 and 4)
- Importance of helping students develop a sense of community (level 4)
- Encouraging learner autonomy, and related to this, the challenge of finding the right balance between motivating students and 'interfering' too much (as one of the tutors called it) (level 5)
- Designing tasks that allow students to interact and collaborate in multiple modes while not overloading them cognitively (levels 5 and 6)

- Clash between student expectations (e.g. focus on language, error correction) and course demands (focus on communication) (level 5)
- Using particular tools for particular purposes and thus developing one's own style, e.g. employing the text chat in FlashMeeting for modelling vocabulary (levels 6 and 7)

Another finding – which in our opinion amounts to the most important one – was that students found it very difficult to collaborate, even though tasks were designed and carefully scaffolded to help students develop the necessary group autonomy to collaborate (Mangenot and Nissen 2006) and teachers encouraged students to do so. Thus the tasks encouraged learners to work together and develop skills at three levels:

- the socioaffective level, by helping learners to get to know one another
- the sociocognitive level, by encouraging joint problem solving
- the organizational level, by giving learners the opportunity to plan their work jointly

That collaboration proved difficult became clear from the way students used the tools and from the feedback given by both learners and tutors. To a certain extent this may have been caused by the course developers not making this focus on collaboration sufficiently clear to students, by not allowing enough time for students to familiarize themselves with the collaborative learning spaces, and by not preparing tutors specifically to encourage and support collaborative learning. At the same time, it also had to do with many students' approach to learning – one of the tutors attempted to explain it as follows:

[The students are] used to being distance students working a lot on their own and every so often coming to tutorials but this type of group work where everyone has to put in an effort to come up with [...] results that show the whole group's activity, that was something new.

Yet that it is not just in distance settings where collaboration can prove problematic has been shown in other research. In a study of collective cognition that examined the use of a wiki in a schools context, Lund and Smørdal (2006, 44) summarize the challenges as follows: 'Working with wikis involves an epistemological shift, from individually acquired to collectively created knowledge. ... It follows that the teacher's professional repertoire is expanded. Planning lessons, a traditional hallmark of teacher expertise, need to be extended to *designs*.'

This was also recognized by the tutors who took part in the Open University project. One of them identified the following training needs: 'getting more guidelines on, for example, [...] ideas on how to motivate students to keep working, some ideas

about [...] structuring the work [...] a bit more, ... kind of generic help with a particular tool [...] and our role as a tutor.' For this reason it was decided to carry out another project in the context of the VLE, this time focusing more on teachers, on what they can do to foster collaborative language learning online, and on how they can be supported in this.

4.3 Tutor training project

This project was carried out jointly with the Barcelona-based Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (UOC) in 2008 as both institutions were keen to share their expertise regarding online learning: the Open University's experience in teaching via synchronous audio conferencing and tutor training in that context, and the UOC's expertise with asynchronous teaching and with training tutors in supporting students asynchronously. Eight researchers took part (the author of this article and 5 other specialists in online and distance language learning and teaching, who also acted as moderators, and 2 specialists in digital literacy) as well as 20 teachers (6 associate lecturers in French/German/Spanish from the OU who teach at levels 2 and 3 (CEF exit levels B2 and C1), and 14 English teachers from the UOC). The objectives of the six-week project included:

- (1) Finding out more about distance teachers' experience of facilitating online group work;
- (2) Identifying development needs in this area;
- (3) Trying out the potential of particular asynchronous and synchronous tools to support collaborative learning;
- (4) Trialling possible development activities.

The idea was to give the researchers more knowledge of fostering collaboration using a Moodle platform and to give teachers hands-on experience by engaging them in collaborative activity using CMC tools and thus developing their online teaching skills. This is similar to the 'experiential modelling approach' that Hoven (2006, 339) describes, one 'in which all of the tools and processes that were taught in the course were modelled and experienced by students (teachers)'. While we wanted to give tutors the opportunity to interact asynchronously as well as synchronously, at the same time we did not want to overload them in the relatively short period of the project. So the tools chosen were limited to forums, wikis and Elluminate, a videoconferencing system that is going to be part of the Open University's virtual learning environment from 2009 onwards and that will be used by the new German course.

Factors that were deemed important when setting up the project and designing the activities were the following: tools training, developing a sense of community, task design, and moderation. As most of the teachers were not familiar with all tools used in the project, guidelines in the form of quick start guides were provided for the asynchronous tools (forums and wikis) and training sessions were offered for the videoconferencing tool Elluminate. All but one of the teachers participated in a session, and most small groups used Elluminate to plan and discuss their work (see below).

The collaborative tasks followed a sociocultural approach to learning, encouraging interaction between the teachers in order to help them build knowledge about collaborative learning. In that, they were informed by what Kreijns, Kirschner and Jochems (2003, 339) call the 'conceptual approach' to collaborative learning, attempting to satisfy the following conditions:

- Positive interdependence
- Promotive interaction
- Individual accountability
- Interpersonal and small-group skills
- Group processing

To ensure that teachers would get to know one another (some had met before but none of the OU tutors had met any of the UOC teachers) and develop a sense of community, a forum dedicated to introductions was set up where teachers spent the first few days presenting themselves and interacting with one another primarily on a social level. Instructions were detailed as to what tutors should do, namely read any other contributions first, then introduce themselves (describing their online (and collaborative) language teaching experience) and reply to some of the other introductions (relating to what the other person had said, thus bringing out some shared experience). Predictably, this shared experience included training and teaching; yet to the surprise of the researchers, the topic that received most attention was gardening!

The main tasks consisted of (1) the discussion of an example of a failed collaborative class activity and (2) the design of a collaborative learning activity for potential use with a group of language students. The discussion of the case study was supported by research articles about collaborative learning, highlighting different skills and techniques, and it culminated in a discussion of principles of collaborative learning. The hands-on development of a collaborative task was done in small groups where members depended on one another and where interpersonal and small-group skills were crucial. In order to give the teachers more ownership of their

groups and create a sense of community, tutors were responsible for their own group formation. It was also stipulated that each group should contain tutors from both institutions, thus ensuring that groups did not just contain people who already knew each other. Groups were given their own spaces on the VLE (forum and wiki) as well as access to an Elluminate conference (with 24/7 access). They were free to use whichever tool (and any combination thereof), both for the group meetings and for the design and presentation of their task. Commenting and reflection (including self-reflection) were also encouraged through the tasks.

Detailed instructions for the tasks were integrated into the study calendar on the Moodle site, thus providing careful scaffolding; this was complemented by a (one-way) news forum and a forum for teacher queries. In addition, the researchers took it in turns to moderate the activities by commenting on activities and encouraging teachers, if appropriate, and modelling interaction. Data were collected through a post-course questionnaire, interviews with eight teachers, record of activities on Moodle (discussions, activities etc.) and Moodle logs.

Although the project has only just finished and data analysis has barely started, there are some preliminary findings about how to train online teachers based on the interaction amongst tutors in the project and the collaborative work they produced. It appears that the guidelines, the training session and the hands-on use of the tools enabled tutors to get to grips with the technology and also helped them find out more about the possibilities as well as the constraints of the medium. So they were able to use the tools for collaborating with one another in the context of the project as well as incorporating them into the activities they designed themselves. It was interesting to see that our approach to facilitating interaction and collaboration – using careful scaffolding and instructions, small group activities, and employing particular tools for particular purposes – was reflected in the activities that the tutors designed. They also showed the extent to which tutors used their creativity by, for example, incorporating images and websites, and choosing tools best suited for designing, setting and presenting their work. The feedback that has been analysed so far also shows the importance that teachers attribute to such training events and highlights their willingness to apply the new skills and knowledge to their own teaching.

6 Conclusion

Despite the calls for learner autonomy and a transformed tutor role mentioned in the introduction, online classroom settings (especially synchronous environments that allow for speaking) are often characterized by a tutor-centred approach to teaching

(Stickler, Batstone, Duensing and Heins 2005; Hampel, Stickler and Scott in preparation). Rather than necessarily being caused by the teacher's conviction of the benefits of such a transmission approach to teaching, this may also be due to the mediating effects of technology. Unfamiliarity with a new communication tool, technical problems, as well as the affordances of teaching and learning in an online environment which are different from those in a face-to-face environment, are all factors that can appear easier to deal with using a more directive approach – both for teachers and students. Also, students in general and distance students in particular find collaboration a challenge and teachers need to support them so they can develop the necessary autonomy to deal with such tasks. A more learner-centred approach requires the ability on part of the teacher to provide a setting in which learners can develop the socioaffective, sociocognitive and organizational skills that are prerequisites of collaboration. This can be facilitated by appropriate tasks, moderation, and feedback.

The two projects presented in this article have shown the importance of teacher training in online environments. On the one hand, they have helped to clarify the skills that tutors need to work in complex online environments and to support student interaction in a language learning context; on the other hand they have pointed to the kind of training that tutors actually need in order to acquire these skills. Such training would feature the following components:

- Mix of pre-service and in-service training to develop a range of skills and maintain and update them
- Tools training and technical support
- Hands-on pedagogical training; putting teachers in the role of students interacting with one another and collaborating on a task
- Guidance with task design that creates the right conditions for collaboration and makes best use of the tools employed
- Modelling what is expected of teachers (e.g. careful scaffolding of tasks, precise task instructions, moderation)
- Activity banks with interactive tasks for tutor use
- Pedagogical support
- Self-reflection and feedback
- Space for sharing experience

Last but not least, the projects have highlighted a number of institutional factors that impact on the success of training programmes to foster teachers' skills in supporting learner interaction and collaboration. These include the necessity of tailoring training to specific institutional needs (e.g. in terms of tools), the fit of pedagogical

approaches and institutional set-up, and the need to regulate and monitor tutor workload (e.g. with the help of guidelines for teachers and students) to ensure tutors are not called upon 24/7.

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