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Online tutorial support in Open Distance Learning through audio-graphic SCMC: tutor impressions.

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ABSTRACT

The adoption of audio-graphic conferencing brings with it changes to the learning experience for tutors and students alike. These need to be researched to gain an insight into the learning experience of those teaching and being taught through the medium. One of the conferencing tools that has been utilised for much of the documented research on audio-graphic conferencing is the *Lyceum* software, used at the UK Open University since 2002 to provide tutorial support for higher level language learners. The use of the software has been reported at different stages, from the pilot projects since 1997 (Hauck & Haezwindt, 1999, Shield 2000, Kötter 2001, Hewer and Shield 2001), to reports of the mainstream use (Hampel 2003, Hampel & Hauck 2004). It seems logical that the next step should be to research into the tutors' experiences of the audio-graphic tool, which is a key element in the CALL research agenda (Warschauer, 1997; Debski & Levy, 1999). As the Open University prepares to phase out the software and replace it with a Moodle-based open-content audio-graphic synchronous conferencing tool, the insight into teaching with such tools becomes more valuable to other language learning professionals and institutions.

In this paper we will report on a study of data collected from 18 tutors after spending a year teaching a new beginners' course online. We will examine their perceptions of the audio-graphic tool and challenge some of the results from the initial research into audio-graphic conferencing. Most tutors found the teaching experience very positive and liked using the tool; however some experienced technical problems and believe that these affect the learning experience. In addition we will report on the first and successful use of the environment for assessment purposes.

1 Introduction

The role of the computer in computer-mediated communication (CMC) has evolved from being a source of language input, or one part of the communication chain (human-computer interaction), to being the medium through which learners communicate (human-to-human interaction via the computer). CMC is now viewed as “communication that takes place between human beings via the instrumentality of computers” (Herring, 1996:1). Synchronous CMC (SCMC) was first limited to text, but since the mid 1990s audio conferencing has been commonly available, first through dedicated software, later more commonly available through free applications such as ‘NetMeeting’, ‘Yahoo!’, or ‘Windows Messenger’.

Audio conferencing systems today can feature images, whiteboards, text editors, text chat facilities and/or web browsers that can improve communication and interaction. Audio-graphic conferencing has thus developed into multi-modal tools (including visual, verbal and written elements). In the field of CALL, audio-graphic conferencing provides learners with opportunities to interact in the target language with other learners or with native speakers. The audio-graphic software provides a collaborative learning environment where a relationship can develop between learner/learner or tutor/learner within the principles of social constructivism: audio-graphic SCMC “is an ideal medium for collaborative learning through social interaction both with tutors and with peers” (Hampel & Hauck, 2004:68). In the case of Open and Distance Learning (ODL), audio-graphic conferencing can help in “removing the distance from distance learning” (Kötter & Shield, 2000:16). However, mediated interaction through audio-graphics raises issues such as the inclusion of contextual information, the narrowing of the range of symbolic cues, and the increased possibility of ambiguity (Erben, 1999); also, the management process during online tutorials is characterised by disruption and discontinuity (Ibid).

Audio-graphic conferencing systems have been adopted as language learning tools mainly by ODL providers, such as *OnLive Traveller*, used by Högskolan Dalarna University in Sweden, or *Lyceum*, the UK Open University’s audio-graphic tool. One key issue in the research into the audio-graphic environments is to research what the tutors’ experiences of the tools are, which is a key element in the CALL research agenda (Warschauer, 1997) as “the teacher’s point of view provides us with another vital perspective (...) and it is a view that must be carefully acknowledged if CALL is to be successful” (Debski & Levy, 1999:10). The importance of the tutor in audio-graphics has been acknowledged from the first research: “a key figure to the success of the whole project was the tutor” (Kötter, Rodine & Shield, 1999:4 of printed document) to the latest, such as the case of a study of online tuition using *OnLive Traveller* where a success factor was “the close relationship which is created between the teachers and the students” (Eklund-Braconi, 2004). There is a call for research into the human side of teaching with audio-graphics as well as the software if best practice is to be identified and shared: “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.” (Hampel & Stickler, 2005:323).

One common criticism of research into audio-graphic tools is that many are exclusive to the institutions that use them and therefore, although that research is of interest to the wider research and teaching community, its applicable value seems quite limited. This paper will focus on one specific tool (*Lyceum*) at one specific institution (The UK Open University) but the university intends to phase out *Lyceum* in favour of a new Moodle-based open-content audio-graphic synchronous conferencing tool, which should be available in 2008. Whether this new software will have the same characteristics or provide the same affordances is too early to tell, although the lessons learnt from experience and research will actively inform the design of the new tool. With this development, the insight into teaching with such tools becomes more valuable to other language learning professionals and institutions.

2 The audio-graphic tutor’s perspective

The decision to use a particular piece of software in Higher Education institutions can depend on an individual tutor, department, or it can be a University policy. For example, Open University tutors and students are given the audio-graphic software *Lyceum* and no other alternative is available to them. In their modal considerations for CMC, Levy & Stockwell (2006: 96-97) state that “the choice of media used for the communication has the potential to affect the message in the amount of time it takes to be sent and received, the relationships between the participants in the communication, the types of language used in the message, the types of equipment necessary in order to conduct the communication, and even the preferences of the individuals involved”. Greenberg (2003) states that the success of the software is dependent on the positive attitude of tutors. Tutors can offer a unique perspective on a learning environment, and this should be valued and researched: “The teacher’s point of view provides us with another vital perspective (...) and it is a view that must be carefully acknowledged if CALL is to be successful”. (Debski & Levy, 1999:10). Hence, perceptions are essential: if tutors find it useful, easy to use and “believe” in it, they will convey it to their students (and if they do not, it is likely that they will convey that too).

Some studies into the beliefs of tutors using the audio-graphic software *Lyceum* have been carried out at The Open University, including those by Hampel, Greenberg, and Coleman:

In 2002, Hampel and Hauck (2004) evaluated the experience of 15 tutors teaching the first-ever OU language course (German upper-intermediate) to use audio-graphic conferencing. The feedback from the tutors included some information on their perspective of teaching with the software. Their main concern was the technical (mostly relating to ISPs and connections) and sound quality problems they experienced, and most of the tutors agreed that these technical issues affected the online learning experience. Another concern was the demands on their time, and the effort required to make the online activities

work. But still, most tutors had a positive experience and as they familiarised themselves with the software, they were better equipped to cater to student needs.

In another study, Hampel (2003) examined the experience of six tutors teaching with the same software in an advanced German course. As well as the technical problems mentioned above, the tutors' main concern was the lack of body language, which the tutors said made the environment less spontaneous, leading to awkward silences and making participation more difficult. However, the overall experience was positive and the majority of the tutors agreed that, in spite of their concerns, using the audio-graphic software had improved the students' oral communication skills. Tutors claimed that their students had found the experience stimulating and it had increased motivation as well as encouraged them to take more control over their own learning situation. The multimodal environment impressed the tutors, who saw potential for it to address different learning styles.

In contrast, Greenberg (2003) claimed that the majority of tutors who used the same audio-graphic software were not positive about repeating the experience. These contrasting views need further research to seek clarification.

Coleman (2003) surveyed the majority of the tutors who were about to start teaching *Portales*, the beginners' Spanish distance learning course our study focuses on. Of the 59 replies he obtained, 23 were from tutors who taught the online version of the course. Being the first year that the course ran, and the first time that audio-graphic conferencing was used for a Spanish course, none of the tutors had any experience of teaching with the software, although they had been briefed and received the training. The results for the 23 online tutors are below:

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Online tutorials can offer the same learning potential as face-to-face	3 (13%)	10 (43%)	7 (30%)	3 (13%)	0
Effective language learning requires face-to-face contact	1 (4%)	6 (26%)	3 (13%)	10 (43%)	3 (13%)
<i>Lyceum</i> offers a great opportunity to students who cannot participate in face-to-face tutorials	15 (65%)	6 (26%)	2 (9%)	0	0
I don't think the same group dynamic can be created online as when students are together in the same room	0	12 (52%)	3 (13%)	6 (26%)	2 (9%)
I expect online tutorials to become increasingly popular with students	8 (35%)	14 (61%)	1 (4%)	0	0
It's unfair to expect students to cope with new technology and a new language at the same time	2 (9%)	4 (17%)	1 (4%)	12 (52%)	4 (17%)

Table 2: Spanish online tutor beliefs (adapted from Coleman, 2003)

Although the majority of tutors believe that the audio-graphic software is a great alternative to face-to-face, this is only for those students who cannot rather than choose not to attend face-to-face tutorials. 96% also think that online tuition will become more popular, but in the full study, which included the results of the face-to-face tutors and also the German tutors, Coleman finds that “the more tutors know of the OU and of *Lyceum*, the less they predict that online tuition will prove popular” (2003:4). 28% consider it unfair to expect students to cope with the technology at the same time as learning a new language. At the beginning of the course, 43% of tutors are either waiting to decide or sceptical about the potential of the online environment. More than half the tutors do not think that the same group dynamics can be created online as in face-to-face, and 30% believe that effective language learning requires face-to-face contact. The overall picture is very mixed, and suggests that although some tutors have chosen to teach the online version of the course, they have reservations about the online environment. Potentially, this could be damaging to an online course, as it is the tutors who can convey and show enthusiasm for the possibilities of the medium to the students.

3 The study

To ascertain what the impressions of teaching with the audio-graphic software in the case of a beginners’ course, and whether the negative experiences and problems reported in the literature still applied after upgrades to the software in the years after the original studies were undertaken, this study was set up. In the next section we will present the context of a study of data collected from 18 tutors after spending a year teaching a new beginners’ course online. We will then examine their perceptions of the audio-graphic tool.

3.1 Context: course and software

To help fully understand the context of the impressions reported in this study, details of the course and the audio-graphic SCMC software used are presented below.

3.1.1 The course

The tutors who took part in this study teach *Portales*, the Open University beginners’ Spanish distance course. The course aims to teach the language necessary to help students with practical situations such as visiting, living and working in, as well as many aspects of the cultures of Spanish-speaking areas. The philosophy of the course is “language learning through use”, with focus on interaction. Learning is organised in bite-sized chunks, with gradual development of vocabulary and grammar and explicitly teaches study and language learning skills.

The materials consist of 6 books and 6 audio CDs, study guides, and assessment materials. In addition, students have access to a course website, where they have access to electronic versions of many of the course materials, such as the main teaching and assessment books on e-book PDF format, or the

audio files for the listening component of their assessment, as well as the course calendar, online resources and an asynchronous text CMC conference.

Portales requires around 300 hours of study. Two versions of the course are available to students, with two different course codes: L194 and LZX194. Both courses are exactly the same but for the medium for tutorials and oral assessment. For L194 students tutorials and the end of course oral assessment are face-to-face, whereas LZX 194 students use audio-graphic conferencing instead. Tutorial time is 21 hours. These tutorials, which are not compulsory to complete the course, offer opportunities for interaction among students, which is considered by many the main challenge to the provision of distance language learning. As such, the linguistic focus during tutorials is usually on fluency over accuracy. In the first year the course was offered (2003-4), 1694 students signed up for L194 and 536 for LZX194. 26 tutors taught the online strand, with a ratio of between 15-20 students per tutor (although many tutors chose to teach more than one tutor group).

As the course was in its first year of presentation and this was the first time a Spanish course offered online tuition, the online tutors had experience as distance language teachers in the face-to-face mode but had no experience of teaching using audio-graphic conferencing when they started tutoring. Because of the technical, pedagogical, and time challenges of the new medium, online tutors were provided with sets of materials which they could choose to use for their tutorials. The activities were written within a constructivist approach with communication as a main goal, based on theories from cognitive and interactionist SLA but taking into consideration sociocultural theories of performance in addition to the psycholinguistic approach (Rosell-Aguilar, 2005). Tutors had the freedom to use the materials provided as they are, modify them, or not use them at all. In any case, they managed their tutorials according to their teaching style and the group of learners in their tutorial group, hence making the learning experience different in each case.

As mentioned above, teaching with audio-graphic software places new demands on the tutor, who has to learn how to use the software and how to adapt their teaching style to the audio-graphic environment. All users are prompted to go through an automated tutorial when they install the software, and the university provides a dedicated helpdesk for any technical problems. In addition, tutors receive three training sessions before the course starts. The first session focuses on technical training on the main features of the software. The second session focuses on pedagogical training, including how to promote peer work, community building, and strategies for inclusion of all students. During the third session, tutors are asked to prepare an activity (using the teaching materials provided) and do simulations with other tutors posing as students. A fourth and final training session takes place before the end of course assessment, to ensure tutors are familiar with the format, the marking criteria, how to use the recording facility and send the audio files to the examinations office.

3.1.2 The software and its challenges

The audio-graphic software used for language courses at The Open University is an in-house developed software called *Lyceum*. It allows multiple users to meet online for plenary or small group work and includes synchronous audio conferencing, whiteboards, a text editor, text chat, and a voting facility among other tools. When students log on to the environment, they enter a lobby and from there they can access the different rooms available (see figure 1, the *Lyceum* Lobby). The software is available to all Open University students and many use it beyond tutorial time to meet socially or form study and revision groups, hence making the most of the affordances of the tool as a medium that allows them to collaborate and take responsibility for their own learning. A taster website is available (www.open.ac.uk/Lyceum-taster).

<insert figure 1>

Figure 1: The *Lyceum* lobby. As users access the software, they arrive at the lobby, where they can see who else is in the rooms and what bookings have been made. On the bottom left hand side corner we can see the buttons for the functionalities that users have available (talk, raise hand, indicate absence, vote yes or no, and wipe) as well as the list of users online.

The use of this conferencing software has been documented at different stages, from the pilot projects (Hauck & Haezwindt, 1999, Shield 2000, Kötter 2001, Hewer and Shield 2001), to reports on its use once adopted by the university in 2002 (Hampel 2003, Hampel & Hauck 2004). The software was regarded as the ideal tool available to provide opportunities for interaction in L2 and to provide frequent and instant feedback (Hewer, 2001). The fact that it is available anytime from anywhere with an internet connection means that it is more accessible to both tutors and students, who traditionally had to travel to a regional centre for tutorials or rely on telephone tuition. There have been debates about the pros and cons of the medium and its potential for learning both inside and outside the university, and many reports and theories about previous experiences. These included the benefits and challenges, which included technical issues such as sound quality and weak connections, and the type of tasks designed for the medium. In addition, anecdotal evidence from training sessions, conversations and email exchanges with tutors and students, messageboard contributions, plus reports from staff tutors, had identified two further issues about the learning environment: it was described as a cold medium, and the interaction patterns considered slow, which suggest that it is not an ideal environment for interaction.

Another issue that raised concern was the suitability of using audio-graphic conferencing at beginner level. There are opinions that synchronous audio conferencing is best suited to “learners of at least intermediate competence in the target language” (Kötter, 2001: 347) and that “synchronous CMC places a higher cognitive load on the learner, and as such is better suited to higher proficiency learners” (Skehan, 1998, in Levy & Stockwell, 2006). It was also for this reason that the suggested tutorial materials for tutors were created, reinforced by the expertise of the Open University Institute for Educational technology, who warned that in the audio-graphic environment “activities for beginners need to be highly structured with explicit instructions” (Price, 2002).

Finally, one of the main drivers for this particular study was the receipt by the researcher of an account of a first tutorial by one of the tutors who had just begun teaching using the audio-graphic software. She is a very experienced OU language tutor who had completed all the training given and was looking forward to teaching in the new environment. In her email, she described the tutorial as “a disaster” and recounted how her first tutorial was marred by technical problems which included loss of sound and students getting disconnected for no apparent reason. Even she was disconnected a few times for a few minutes each time. She described her feelings of frustration and being “a bit down” about the experience after she had thoroughly prepared for the tutorial. She also wrote that she was worried about her students, whom she described as “anxious” in the face of these problems, but she had managed to reassure them by telling them this was a one-off and that in the previous online sessions she had attended (her training sessions) no such problems had occurred. She writes “If these technical problems persist it is going to be quite difficult to make good use of our tutorial time”. However she finished by describing herself as an optimist and hoping “that these were just teething problems and all will be good in a few weeks’ time”. Was this an isolated case or was something similar happening in other tutorials? If this experience was not that of a single tutor, but commonplace, what were the implications for the online version of the course? Despite the development strategy, materials development, training for students and tutors, if the tool was not robust enough, what kind of tutorial support was the University offering the hundreds of students who had signed up for the online version of the course?

3.1.3 Methodology

All 26 tutors who taught the online strand of the course were sent a questionnaire which asked about their impressions of teaching with the audio-graphic software at the end of the first year of presentation of the course. The questionnaire aimed to obtain information on what the experience of providing tutorial support through the SCMC software was like: the tutors’ reasons for choosing to teach the online tuition strand of the course and whether they would be teaching with it again, their general opinion of the tool, and in particular their opinion of it for language learning and for assessment purposes; if they would make any changes to the software, whether they had experienced technical problems and their effect on the tutorials, and what the atmosphere was like during tutorials. 18 questionnaires (69%) were returned. The data has been approached quantitatively and the results are presented below.

3.2 Results: Tutor impressions of teaching with the audio-graphic software

The tutors were asked about their reasons for choosing to teach the online version of the course. Fourteen tutors (78%) state that they chose to do it to get a new experience in audio conferencing and expand their skills. Six also mention the convenience of not having to travel to a regional centre to teach. One had no choice as she teaches from Spain and her students are based all over Europe, but indicates that she would have chosen it anyway as it presents a challenge and offers new possibilities.

The tutor training provided appears to be effective as all tutors feel confident using the software, feel they can use the modules (whiteboard, grid, document, text chat), and feel they can use the tools (pin, moving boxes, writing, pictures...) by the end of the course. In addition, all except one think they know what most of the menus, icons and buttons do. However, one tutor does say "Perhaps I would provide more training for tutors before going live, to anticipate difficulties or be better prepared to deal with the particularities of *Lyceum*."

The tutors' impressions of using the audio-graphic software were mostly positive (with the exception of one tutor, who found it a terrible experience). This is in line with the findings of Hampel in her various studies. The main findings are presented here in the following categories:

- General opinion of the tool
- Technical problems
- Evaluation as a language learning tool
- Changes to the software
- Assessment
- The atmosphere in the environment
- Returning to audio-graphic tutoring

General opinion of the tool

Sixteen tutors (89%) say they like using the audio-graphic software. Of the two who do not like it, one is the tutor with the very negative experience, who just says she "hates it", and the other says that "although it is a great tool and very well designed, I miss/need the visual interaction with my students. I didn't feel as motivated as I do in a face to face class."

When asked what they found particularly enjoyable about the tutorials, eight tutors (44%) mentioned communicating with the students; others mentioned the medium itself, being able to work from home rather than travelling, the flexibility afforded by the software, the tools available, and the fact that it was fun. One comment which summarises the potential of the tool for language learning was that what makes the tutorials enjoyable is "the ability to change pairs easily (no moving about a classroom carrying papers), the frequency of tutorials, the comfort of the medium, working with attractive graphics...lots!"; another tutor says "Because the contact is 'direct', even if it is not face-to-face: there is the voice, the real-time co-presence, the immediate feedback and the group aspect", she adds: "It is fun to find ourselves in the comfort of our own homes and for me it is thrilling to think that all this is possible with people thousands of miles away or house-bound. The possibilities offered by *Lyceum* in this aspect are fantastic and I am proud of taking part in this kind of learning experience".

In contrast, when asked what they found particularly difficult about the tutorials, seven tutors (39%) mention technical problems such as the audio breaking up or the instances when they get disconnected. One of the tutors, however, thinks that "unless they are recurrent, students cope well with them [the technical problems] and learn ways to get around them". Four tutors mention low student

attendance, and another four the lack of visual contact. Low attendance and some reluctance to participate apply to OU language tutorials in general and are commonplace in telephone tuition. Two tutors found having to explain not only the instructions to the activities, but also the technical instructions were too time-consuming. And one tutor mentions silences when people are reluctant to participate. The tutor with the very negative experience states that “Nothing [is] difficult as such, but *Lyceum* is the most in-designed [sic] and ineffective teaching medium ever!”

Technical problems

Sixteen tutors (89%) have experienced some sort of technical problem while using the software, mostly getting temporarily disconnected and some sound problems. This is consistent with the experience reported by previous research: Hampel (2003) had found that 66.7% of the tutors in her sample believed that technical problems had had a negative effect on the learning experience. Similarly, thirteen tutors (72%) think that encountering technical problems had a negative impact on their students' learning, three years after Hampel's study. Two tutors do not think technical problems had a negative effect and a further two did not reply. Three think that technical problems may have been the reason for decreasing attendance and five consider it distressing and demoralising. This question is perhaps a little too broad as some tutors comment on the fact that some students could not get the software to run or work properly at all, which probably has more to do with computers that do not meet the minimum specification and less with the software. One of the tutors who does not think technical problems had a negative impact says that she developed some strategies “for them to keep working while I sort out my problems” and another says that herself and her students learnt to live with them: “the students assume that some technical problems may arise and soon learn strategies to minimise the impact”. She adds that “The tutor's attitude and resources are very important here”.

Evaluation as a language learning tool

Despite the technical problems, 15 tutors (83%) felt that their students got enough opportunities to practice their speaking skills and also that the students made the most of those opportunities. The tutor with the very negative experience says that “some did and some didn't” and the remaining two tutors felt that their students did not get enough opportunities. This is once again consistent with previous research, where 83% of tutors agreed that using the software had improved their students' oral communication skills. One tutor qualifies this by saying that although they did not speak as much as she would have liked, this is what can be expected of the type of student at beginner level and adds that “the quality and management of speaking opportunities are related to the work of the tutor” rather than the software. Another tutor sometimes got the impression that when speaking, the students relied on printed materials they might have with them.

When asked what they consider to be the most and least helpful aspects of using the software for language learning, tutors list among the most helpful

aspects the fact that it allows students who otherwise would not have access to tutorials to attend (5), learning from home (3), access to fellow students online for self-help groups (2), flexibility (2), no visual prejudices, interaction, reliance, communication, multimodality. One tutor says that “*Lyceum* is very user-friendly. Even students who feel they are not very technically or computer trained soon get to know the system, have no problems and in fact, this is an added boost of confidence for them”. She thinks that students are more confident and willing to take risks as they can “hide” in the anonymity of the medium; she also enjoys the richness that having students in different places brings to the tutorials, which she says “can be used effectively to produce “real” conversations”. For example, asking about the weather or what people are wearing is a much more meaningful activity when students are apart from one another than face-to-face. Another tutor says: “I think the best thing about *Lyceum* is the contact students have with each other, both speaking Spanish and as a support network”. At both ends of the spectrum, whilst one tutor says “As a tutor I could simultaneously write and speak. I found that helped students” and another “It’s just like a real class face-to-face”, the tutor with the very negative experience, in contrast, states that there is “absolutely nothing” helpful about the software.

With regards to the least helpful aspects, the majority of tutors mention lack of body language and visual clues (10), and technical or sound problems (4). These were the also main concerns that Hampel had found in her 2002 study. Other issues listed are audio quality, the lack of compatibility between *Lyceum* and other applications, which prevents them from using materials from other sources, the fact that activities take longer than face to face, which one tutor says is “not [a] natural way of interacting”, and the fact that communication can be slow, which is explored later. Perhaps one comment that summarises the general feeling is “The lack of visual interaction and the turn taking to speak made the tutorials a bit unnatural, not as dynamic as face to face ones. I use a lot of gestures and mimic at beginners level and found myself using English a lot more than I would in a face to face situation.” Once again, an issue that arises is the role of the tutor: “it depends tremendously on the tutor: his/her confidence in the medium, his/her preparation, (...) and his/her management, so if this fails...”

Changes to the software

Nine tutors (50%) say they would not change anything in *Lyceum*. Among their replies they say: “I am really enjoying it” and “I cannot think of any changes that would make it better”, and one tutor wishes a web browser was available. The other 50% say they would make changes. Among these the most wanted are changes that would improve communication, such as being able to see faces (3), and also technical issues such as compatibility with Microsoft Word (2), making the list of students attending be in the same order for all users (2), or a “lock to talk” button for tutors.

Assessment

This was the first time The Open University had used *Lyceum* for assessment purposes, and tutors were asked to do the oral component by having a one-to-one encounter with each student (as they would in the face-to-face version of the course). The encounter consisted of two sections: in the first one students had to complete an exchange of information with the tutor on a series of given topics (description of family, routine, holidays, future plans...) and in the second section they took part in a role-play to book a holiday. All eighteen tutors carried out the oral component of the course assessment via *Lyceum*, recorded it using the recording tool that is available in the software, and submitted the recordings online to the exams office. The experience of using the software for assessment purposes was positive for all of them. Even the tutor who had a very negative experience considered it “fractionally less lousy than usual”. Although four complained that the process was more time consuming than in the face-to-face equivalent, they considered it coherent to assess in the same medium where the teaching took place.

The atmosphere in the environment

We reported above how *Lyceum* has been described as a cold environment. When asked whether they agree with this description, seven (39%) agree, and eleven (61%) disagree. Among the six that consider it cold, two state that it is cold at first, but there are ways of creating a warmer environment (a comment shared by some of the tutors who do not agree that the medium is cold), and another two mention once again the lack of paralinguistic clues. The tutor with the very negative experience states that *Lyceum* is “Cold, unfriendly, ineffective”. Those who do not agree that it is a cold medium agree that it can be cold at first but they got to know their students: “It is colder than face-to-face, but not freezing. You can still have a laugh” and “I think when you are an experienced online tutor you can overcome this type of thing through use of emoticons, humour, feedback, text, chat, photos”. So the reported coldness of the medium may not be quite as big an issue as had been hypothesised. In fact, 17 out of the 18 feel at ease with their students and that they got to know their students (although four of them do qualify that not as well as they would face-to-face).

Interaction patterns in the online environment had been described as slow. Fifteen tutors (83%) agree that communication via *Lyceum* can be quite slow, two (11%) disagree and one both agrees and disagrees. Some of the delay in communication is blamed on the technical (as with slow connections there can be a time delay), others blame it on the medium itself and the fact that a button needs to be pressed to speak (similar to what Levy & Stockwell, 2006, refer to as “delayed synchronous” in reference to text chat programs) and people cannot speak all at once, which “loses spontaneity”. Silences are reported to seem longer in the online environment, but many teachers might agree that silences are common in a beginners’ tutorial, so perhaps the key here is that the silences “seem” longer rather than actually being so.

Returning to audio-graphic tutoring

Finally, the tutors were asked if they would continue teaching the strand of the course with online tuition and why. Three tutors say that they will not continue teaching it. One is leaving the OU and says “I think *Lyceum* and similar conferencing system should be the future format of learners at OU and other Universities. It was a great experience to work with it. Thanks.” Among the other two, one had 2 tutorial groups (one face-to-face, one online) and because of time pressures she is dropping one. She has chosen to drop the online group because “I enjoy face to face tutorials more than *Lyceum* ones”. Unsurprisingly, the tutor who had the most negative experience has decided to stop teaching with *Lyceum*: “It’s a horrible product and needs serious redesigning”. In contrast with those three, and with the claim by Greenberg that tutors are not positive about repeating the experience of teaching online, fifteen tutors (83%) state that they will continue teaching the strand of the course with online tuition. They find it enjoyable, convenient, and they have built up their confidence as online tutors, as can be extracted from the following comments: “I enjoy it and my students seem to as well (I hope)”, “I don’t have to travel to tutorials! Well, and for the challenge as well”, “I feel more confident this year and better able to support my learners”, “I enjoy online teaching and it is very flexible”, “It’s real and easy and very convenient!”, “Because I feel it has real potential - I am delighted this year that both my LZX194 groups are meeting in *Lyceum* between tutorials”, and “although as a tutor I enjoy more the classroom environment and direct contact, *Lyceum* is different and helps me develop differently”, “I believe in the system, I think it offers a great opportunity to students who could not otherwise have tutorials, and I think it is effective. Also, I think I am a good *Lyceum* tutor and am able to provide rich and effective learning experiences to my students through this medium”, and finally one tutor says that teaching with the audio-graphic software is “the best thing that’s ever happened to my teaching career”. For these tutors, the online teaching experience has clearly lived up to their motivation for signing up to teach the online version of the course in the first place: they have risen to the challenge and feel positive about it.

4 Conclusion

In this paper we have presented the data collected with regards to perceptions of teaching with an audio-graphic tool and we have found very positive perceptions of the audio-graphic software and to teaching with it, which is consistent with previous research by Hampel *et al* and contradicts the claim by Greenberg that tutors were not positive about repeating the experience: overall, tutors say they think they can use it, enjoy using it, feel it provides good opportunities to practice speaking skills, and most are keen to keep using it. It appears that using it has also been a more positive experience than the tutors themselves had foreseen and shows a positive shift from the scepticism expressed in Coleman’s survey. Although the question was not asked directly, these results seem more optimistic than his claim that tutors are less positive about the audio-graphic software the more they know about it and the Open University. This shift in attitudes can be interpreted to mean that the actual experience is positive enough to change their minds about their previous reservations. Communication with the tool is still considered slow and although some believe the environment can be cold at first, most do not agree that the

environment itself is cold. Tutors also believe that the software provides access to a tutor and peers for learners who otherwise would not be able to attend tutorials and all had a positive experience doing assessment via the audio-graphic conferencing software.

However, many suffered technical problems and believe these had a negative effect on their students' learning, and miss paralinguistic clues and body language. The key issue is the management of tutor and student expectations: it seems logical that if tutors convey to their students that there is bound to be some varying sound quality and that someone might get disconnected from time to time, but that this should not affect performance and students can simply reconnect, then the students would probably accept these as part of the nature of audio-graphic conferencing. Also, what some students or tutors may qualify as "technical problems" is to others "a few glitches" or "varying sound quality". The problem in expectations is that institutions, logically, do not publicise any technical problems the students might suffer. These may not be insurmountable in most cases: technical problems have and continue to be addressed by the software development team, and the system is now very robust; reported technical problems tend to be more related to the use of computers which do not meet the minimum requirements to run the software, and there is a helpdesk available to staff and students. The issue here also has technical and equal opportunities ramifications: the University has a policy to support all students, and these sometimes sign up for the course even though their equipment does not meet the minimum specification that is detailed to them during the registration process. Also part of this commitment is the fact that the software has been made to allow students with low bandwidth connections to connect and enjoy the same features as students with better connections, which has an effect in the overall sound quality for the whole group.

With regards to the tutor who sent an account of a disastrous first tutorial, she persevered with teaching online and by the time of this study at the end of the course she was one of the most positive about the experience of using the audio-graphic software. With a positive attitude, practice, and the help of the helpdesk she and her students were able to get around the technical problems they suffered. As a follow-up to the study after reading her questionnaire, the tutor who had such a negative experience was contacted and asked to recall her first tutorial. She had also experienced the same type of technical problems as the first tutor, and also referred to hoping that the experience would be just "teething problems". However her problems continued and she, who looks forward to her face-to-face tutorials, began to fill with "a sense of dread" about her online tutorials and they became "a chore, not a pleasure". These two similar initial accounts and how they led to such different experiences by the end of the course, as well as some of the comments reported above, reflect how much the success of the provision of tutorial support depends both on the individual tutor's approach and teaching style, and their attitude towards the environment. How this reflected on their respective groups of students and whether it had an effect on their learning experience would have made very interesting research, but unfortunately the data is not available.

One last issue regarding this project in particular is that the course was in its first year of presentation. It is foreseeable that the more experience and expertise with the audio-graphic software the tutors gain - even taking into consideration the decrease in novelty of the medium and the effect that may have on the tutors' attitude and perception of using it as a challenge and something exciting - the more the tutors will learn to know what to expect from the tool, its benefits and its limitations, and therefore use it in a manner which suits their needs and most importantly those of their students. Presumably this will include the adaptation of materials that they have used in the past in the face to face environment to the audio-graphic one and/or the development of new materials that suit their individual teaching styles. Both of these we presume will be informed by their teaching experience and therefore will take into consideration the affordances and limitations of the software.

The advent of the new open-content Moodle-based audio-graphic conferencing software at the Open University will allow its use by individuals and institutions beyond the Open University and it is hoped that this will open the doors to a new wave of research into modes of tuition, delivery strategy, task design for the new medium, tutor and learner attitudes, roles and skills in audio-graphic conferencing in the field of Open and Distance Learning.

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