REVIEW OF DEVELOPING ONLINE LANGUAGE TEACHING

Developing Online Language Teaching: Research-Based Pedagogies and Reflective Practices
Regine Hampel & Ursula Stickler (Eds.)
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Developing Online Language Teaching takes a comprehensive look at issues related to both teaching languages online and providing online technology training to language teachers. As the newest addition to the New Language Learning & Teaching Environments series, it contributes to the series’ technology focus, not only with ideas for pedagogically sound uses of new resources, but also with real-world examples of websites and trainings that have put these ideas into practice. Many of the contributors, including editors Hampel and Stickler, have been heavily involved in European Center for Modern Languages (ECML) projects that aim to make technology more accessible to teachers of English and other languages. Specific information about the training procedures and participants’ reactions are among the strengths of the book.

The volume’s rationale derives from The Open University’s struggles in applying face-to-face teaching methods to online courses. Teachers often encounter administrative pressure to incorporate technology with the expectation of improved pedagogy, necessitating a new model for the development of instructors’ skills in information and communication technology (ICT). In their introductory chapter, Hampel and Stickler explain the sociocultural and socio-constructivist theories underlying the work, referencing the social turn identified by Firth and Wagner (1997).

Throughout the book, contributors emphasize the importance of materials and trainings that meet the needs of teachers and students as well as accessible, hands-on trainings from which instructors can benefit without having to travel long distances. The studies combine quantitative data, typically from participant surveys, with qualitative data, from reports on the process of developing materials and trainings through accounts of their implementation and interviews with participants. Brief interview quotations exemplify themes that arise from both the data and the authors’ impressions about ICT. These to-the-point quotations provide insight into real issues facing teachers. Each chapter offers a useful reflective task to help readers connect the book’s content to their own practice and self-train with technological tools.

The background chapter by Germain-Rutherford and Ernest responds to European reports that technological integration in language classes is slowed due to cost, accessibility, instructor beliefs, and the need for pedagogical training. They detail the Developing Online Teaching Skills (DOTS) project, an online platform for distance teacher training. In addition to this open resource, the ECML-supported
project includes both online and face-to-face workshops and an associated community of practice (CoP) to support online teaching. The background about DOTS nicely sets up the subsequent chapters in that the initial diagnostic survey leading to the development of the program reveals instructor interests and needs, which are themes addressed throughout the book. These themes include an interest in using ICT for authentic materials, a desire for collaboration, a need to learn about interactive tools, and the concern for the time commitment necessary to integrate ICT.

Stanojević’s chapter reports on the implementation of the DOTS project in several European countries. Although language instructors feel pressured to use ICT and desire hands-on training relevant to their current needs, prior research shows that many lack formal training in teaching with ICT. The DOTS project responds to this need. Its Moodle site includes self-training activities for implementing ICT, pedagogical guidelines, sample lesson plans, and ideas to mitigate privacy issues, and it allows instructors to share experiences. The development of the site, which has been used in trainings across Europe, was hands-on and bottom-up, based on socioconstructivist theory and instructors’ reported needs to efficiently integrate technology with pedagogy, and it was revised based on feedback from teacher training workshops. Each DOTS module includes questions and statements to guide teachers’ reflection after using the module on their own and with classes. Projects related to DOTS continue to be supported by the ECML, allowing new instructors exposure to the activities and community. The workshops, follow-up projects, and inclusion of stakeholders in the action research component seem to be crucial to making the system work. Although the CoP in the sites has not been consistently maintained since the workshops ended, future goals for the project include making it more interactive and self-sustainable, incorporating mobile learning, and broadening the online communities to encourage continued participation. The DOTS approach provides lessons for reflection about the implementation of ICT. The chapter includes guidelines on how to use the action research spiral to transform one’s own practice and a list of questions to help instructors evaluate tools and their relevance to classes and students.

The chapter by Başaran, Cinkara, and Cabaroğlu reflects on the implementation of the DOTS project in Turkey, where a shift in government policy promotes ICT to enrich classes through the provision of hardware, software, and training programs. This shift is accompanied by pressure on teachers to improve the quality of education, spurring some to participate voluntarily in workshops. The authors translated the DOTS resources into Turkish and implemented face-to-face workshops with teachers of English from primary and secondary schools to promote the use of the materials and provide hands-on practice. Their pre- and post-workshop survey data deal with the teachers, problems, facilities, existing ICT use, workshops, and materials. In hands-on sessions, participants practiced using the tools and connecting them with pedagogical content, such as selecting materials for class use. Teachers prepared activities such as podcasts and reflected on how they could use them with their own classes. Most participants had not comfortably used ICT previously but found the workshops motivating and useful in improving their knowledge and confidence, producing lessons and worksheets as evidence. Despite a demoralizing lack of technological integration in some instructors’ schools, ideas emerged from the workshops to facilitate ICT use in their classes. The chapter provides substantial quantitative data, presented in a readable graphical format, as well as concise quotations from interview responses. The three authors conclude that more workshops should be organized and training should be provided for new tools in the future.

In their chapter, Stickler and Emke consider the needs of part-time instructors, who make up a large proportion of language teachers but are under-supported and under-researched. Professional development, including assistance incorporating ICT, often is not available to part-time teachers, who also may not have as much pedagogical preparation and may be more constrained by contextual factors such as teaching at multiple institutions. Collected through conversations, surveys, and semistructured interviews with instructors of face-to-face, blended, and online courses, the data of Stickler and Emke suggest that professional development is important for part-timers to keep up with changing technology, improve their effectiveness, and understand technology in their students’ lives, and that they could be well served by
Existing continuing professional development (CPD) is often too simplistic, expensive, time-consuming, or disconnected from the reality of teaching, causing these teachers to rely on reading and conversing with peers for CPD. The authors suggest that research on CPD could be better addressed by studying the gap between context and identity and the realities of development and teaching with technology, rather than the prior “deficit model” (p. 36). Their findings indicate that attitudes toward ICT influence its role in teaching, and they highlight professional identity and motivation as factors affecting successful CPD. Their practical recommendations for improving effectiveness of training include directing it toward problems as they arise, using open educational resources, and designing one’s own training plan.

In “Online language teaching: The learner perspective,” Murphy reports on research conducted at The Open University. Using a theoretical background of demands on teachers in distance education, the online teaching skills pyramid (Hampel and Stickler, 2005), and a community of inquiry framework, her study addresses a gap in the literature about learners’ views on online L2 courses and connects teachers’ and learners’ perspectives. With a carefully-constructed mixed-methods sequence, Murphy surveyed and interviewed learners about the teaching skills that instructors had previously identified as necessary for online language courses. Although some of the skills are associated with good pedagogy in general, some related to teaching presence are more crucial online because instructors cannot as easily gauge learners’ reactions and need to be flexible when technical problems occur. Overall, Murphy finds that teachers need to use technical expertise to create a positive social and cognitive environment online, motivating all students to participate.

Three subsequent chapters, by Stickler and Hampel, Hopkins, and Comas-Quinn and Borthwick, provide—in connection with their data and arguments—a wealth of websites for readers to explore. In “Transforming teaching: New skills for online language learning spaces,” Stickler and Hampel update their skills pyramid (Hampel & Stickler, 2005) for new technological affordances—in particular, online spaces. In online teaching, instructors need to translate technology into sound pedagogy, help learners take control of their use of online spaces for learning, and analyze and develop their own skills. Starting from a theoretical frame showing that teachers often use new technology in old ways, rather than developing new teaching styles to incorporate new technology, the authors go through each level of the skills pyramid, explaining what skills are necessary to implement ICT in online spaces. Social presence and patterns of communication differ between online and face-to-face spaces, necessitating adoption of new skills. They address issues of online etiquette, academic integrity, and privacy, helping instructors set useful guidelines to counter potential problems. Examples of how to use tools and spaces such as chatbots and voice forums mention specific websites but also offer broader suggestions that will outlast the particular resources listed.

In “Free online training spaces for language teachers,” Hopkins outlines an approach to help trainees self-direct their own informal learning about ICT. It can be difficult to find the most useful materials and communities on the Internet out of those available. Using criteria from the literature related to content, design, pedagogical approach, examples, usability, and more, Hopkins describes and evaluates existing resources by including screenshots, critical analysis, and pitfalls. He concludes with suggestions on how to self-train with what is available. As in the chapter by Stickler and Hampel, the list is beneficial for both the specific resources mentioned as well as the concepts for evaluating similar materials in the future.

The contribution by Comas-Quinn and Borthwick takes on the issue of open educational resources (OERs) and open educational practices (OEPs). Starting from a perspective of social responsibility (that knowledge is a public good), they make the issue accessible for teachers who may not know what OERs are available or how to implement them in classes. They address issues of licensing and use, highlighting benefits and challenges of these resources based on user surveys. They also take OERs to the next level with OEPs, activities that involve students and teachers consuming, producing, and researching OERs. They end with an extensive list of useful websites as well as questions for instructors who are starting to
employ and evaluate OERs in their own practice.

Germain-Rutherford introduces online CoPs and their benefits for professional development such as shared materials, dialogue, perspectives, feedback, and collaboration. She surveyed instructors and teacher trainers during two ICT workshops and used a case study methodology to evaluate several online CoPs. Starting from a social theory of learning and a socio-constructivist framework, her discussion suggests that CoPs, with their diverse membership and perspectives, aid language development and intercultural awareness, which is especially helpful for non-native speaker teachers. The structure and effectiveness of the three case study CoPs from the United States and Europe depend upon scale, moderator roles, topics discussed, workshops and other community events, shared resources, and patterns of interaction. She concludes with questions for assessing online CoPs.

In a chapter aimed at teachers wanting to investigate their own teaching, Hampel addresses approaches for practice-based research on online language instruction, specifically on CMC and mobile learning. Stressing that ICT use needs to be grounded in theory, she illuminates the iterative cycle of selecting, implementing, and evaluating technology in one’s own classes. She provides a concise background about learning and pedagogical theory, addresses qualitative research methods through examples from existing studies, and provides suggestions for readers’ own research. Following the sociocultural perspective of the book, methods addressed are participatory research, action research, ethnography, and discourse analysis.

Overall, the book is well organized, with each chapter proceeding logically from the previous. The authors reference each other’s chapters, lending the work cohesion. The volume contributes to the scholarship of the field through its research on in-service teachers of English and other languages at a variety of levels in multiple countries. It also contributes to the research on teacher development, both face-to-face and online, which has direct application for similar programs all over the world. The additional focus on conducting action research and other types of investigation helps connect research and practice—a welcome contribution to the field. With its synthesis of literature, original research, and suggested websites, the book is a valuable resource for teachers, teacher trainers, and researchers. Its blend of research and practical guidance will benefit teachers at all points in their careers.

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