New challenges, the role of the tutor in the teaching of languages at a distance

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ABSTRACT. The nature of the skills and competences needed by tutors teaching students at a distance has been approached in a number of different ways. What has received less attention are the particular skills and competences needed to teach languages at a distance. This is the focus of the research project described in this paper. The paper will review the background literature, which served as a context for a project carried out with tutors of the Open University in the UK to investigate this important and, so far, neglected area. While the skills and competences needed by tutors teaching languages were broadly similar to those needed to teach other subjects at a distance, there were marked differences between the skills needed to teach languages at a distance from those used in the classroom. The outcomes from this research can be regarded as relevant not just to distance language learning, but to language learning and distance education in general.

RÉSUMÉ. La nature des compétences et savoir-faire nécessaires aux professeurs enseignant à distance est un thème qui a été abordé sous plusieurs angles. Les compétences spécifiques à l’enseignement des langues à distance ont, elles, été largement laissées de côté. Cet article fournit un panorama des recherches antérieures qui ont servi de contexte à un projet mené avec des enseignants de l’Open University (Royaume-Uni) et qui a pour objectif d’examiner ce domaine important mais largement laissé dans l’ombre jusqu’à présent. Alors qu’il est apparu que les compétences nécessaires aux professeurs enseignant les langues à distance étaient largement comparables à celles nécessaires à l’enseignement d’autres matières à distance, notre étude a mis en lumière le fait qu’il existe des différences importantes entre les compétences nécessaires à l’enseignement des langues à distance et celles requises en classe. Les conclusions de ces recherches sont pertinentes non seulement pour le domaine de l’enseignement des langues à distance mais aussi pour l’apprentissage des langues et pour l’enseignement à distance en général.

KEYWORDS: open and distance learning, foreign language teaching, tutors; skills and competencies.

MOTS-CLÉS : apprentissage ouvert et à distance, enseignement des langues étrangères, enseignants, compétences, savoir-faire.

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1. Tutors in distance education

1.1. The tutor role

In this article the term ‘tutor’ is used throughout as the job title of the person most closely involved in the support of distance students. The research project described here was carried out with Open University UK (OUUK) staff who are called tutors (or also Associate Lecturers). OUUK tutors organise and run tutorials, either face to face or online; they also mark student assignments, providing – in the case of languages – both spoken and written feedback. In other countries a similar job is done by ‘instructors’ or ‘teachers’.

To understand the skills and competencies needed by the tutor in teaching at a distance, it is first necessary to look at a variety of relevant examples from different contexts and settings around the world. Traditionally, the tutor has been undervalued in the process of teaching at a distance. Despite valuable attempts in the research literature to define distance tutor roles, experts have commented critically on the lack of importance assigned to the role of being a tutor at a distance. Lentell and O'Rourke for instance, argue that tutoring as a professional activity has been carried out largely unseen and unanalysed, certainly in comparison with the attention given to course hard and software: ‘…tutoring tends to be the less visible element of ODL, but is no less essential than good materials and effective administration. Distance education cannot exist without tutors who provide feedback and guidance to students’ (Lentell and O'Rourke, 2004, p. 1).

It has also been suggested that tutors may be ‘unheard’ (Lentell, 1994), or ‘undervalued’ (Lentell, 2003). Traditionally, the development of distance courses has been separated from their delivery, and tutors have often been employed on part-time, temporary contracts with no real career prospects. J.Tait (2004) cites the example of the OUUK, where the role of the tutor as the interface between learners and institution is of particular importance because

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

A further link between tutor and student at the OUUK is that tutors are centrally involved in providing feedback to students’ continuous assessment, and institutional research there has demonstrated that students rate the continuous assessment and its marking by tutors as ‘very helpful’ (see J.Tait, 2004, p. 100). So how do we define the tutor in open and distance Education? There is no single definition of the tutoring role in distance education:
'Your tutoring role may be part-time or full-time; or as a freelance (self-employed) consultant. You may be one of several tutors for the same course, who work with a senior tutor, or you may be solely responsible for all the students in the course. You may have a direct role in authoring the course, you may be a colleague of the course author(s), or you might not know the course authors at all.' (Commonwealth of Learning, 2003, p. 9)

The different roles that tutors might have depend on the institutional context in which they work. This also means that the literature has taken a variety of approaches to the investigation of aspects of these roles. Early studies of the roles and competencies required of tutors were based on the hopes and expectations that learners might have of their tutors. A study by Stevenson et al. (1996) built on previous work in this area at the OUUK (see Naylor, Cowrie and Stevenson, 1990). It was based on questionnaires and semi-structured interviews on one Social Sciences course which disclosed that students liked:

1. [a] mixture of teaching methods
2. Definite aims and targets
3. Advanced notice/programme
4. Encouraging feedback on assignments
5. Exam preparation opportunities

(Stevenson et al., 1996, p. 28)

What students disliked was:

1. Group work that gets nowhere.
2. Being put on the spot/picked on, to answer a question
3. Being marked too leniently
4. Pedantic spelling and grammar corrections
5. Vague general comments on assignments.

(Stevenson et al., 1996, p. 28)

Students expected tutors to be well prepared and encouraging and treat them as individuals. These are, of course, the qualities expected in any teaching environment. In that respect, although the study does not offer any surprise findings, it has the virtue of providing evidence for what any experienced practitioner might have anticipated, and addresses explicitly the particular skills and competencies required by the part-time OUUK tutor at a distance.

Stevenson and Sander (1998), using semi-structured interviews and questionnaires, reported on what students at the OUUK regarded as the qualities of a good tutor. Their sample, unlike the one used in their previous study (Stevenson et al., 1996) was drawn from two different groups of students who were following courses in Social Sciences: those studying a Level 1 course (which can be defined as entry level) and those enrolled in a Level 3 course (which equates to a higher level
course on which students normally embark with prior experience of studying at the OUUK). Although they word their findings rather cautiously, they report that ‘[Level 1] students seem to be dominated by issues of personality style of their tutor. Clearly the understanding nature of the tutor is very important to foundation students taking on higher education for the first time.’ (Stevenson and Sander, 1998, p. 46) whilst Level 3 students have more pragmatic concerns about what they hope to gain from their tutorials, favouring a combination of lectures and group discussions.

Based on the initial work described above, Stevenson and colleagues (Stevenson et al., 1997, 2000, 2006) developed and tested a model for accessing and responding to student expectations in distance learning in a transnational environment. When the model was tested in four European countries, an extensive range of responses was received which enabled the different institutions involved to assess the success, or the degree and nature of tutorial support offered to students. As one might have expected in an international project, both the student expectations and the type of support delivered by the different institutions differed considerably from one institution to another which means that no simple how-to-do-it manual would be appropriate for use across the board (see Stevenson et al., 2000, p. 4).

Fung and Carr (1999) undertook a study at the Open University in Hong Kong (OUHK), based on questionnaires and interviews, which focussed on what students expected to gain from tutorials. Their sample consisted of both new and experienced students studying courses in education (along the same lines as Stevenson and Sander, 1998). As one might expect, the students concentrated on aspects of knowledge and information, practical application of knowledge, study and exam skills in their responses. The authors concluded that there was little variation between the expectations of new and experienced students. This is in direct contrast to what Stevenson and Sander reported from their study with OUUK students. Fung and Carr stated that students needed to prepare more thoroughly for their tutorials, while tutors would benefit from better staff development on effective group work skills. Fung and Carr claim that ‘comparisons with similar students elsewhere … suggest that Hong Kong students views’ on the function and formats of tutorials are not significantly different from those of their Western counterparts …’ (Fung and Carr, 1999, p. 163).

Egan and Akdere (2005) report on a study about roles and competences in distance education, conducted in the USA. They used student-practitioners and experts from the field and compared their results with those from two previous studies. Unsurprisingly, in this study there was greater emphasis on competencies associated with the technical side of distance education than in the previous study, which led them to the conclusion that greater ‘integration of situational, communication, management-related content and interaction-focused content in distance education curriculum’ (Egan and Akdere, 2005, p. 100) would be desirable. The research reported in this section covers a wide range of different contexts, and varies in the detail of the findings, so that no clear overall picture emerged. Many of the results were reasonably predictable – but did provide valuable insights into the relationship between tutor and student in distance education.
1.2. Classifying roles and a conceptual framework

Having considered the tutor role and the skills demanded of them, how has this role been conceptualised and realised in practice? On the basis of work undertaken at the OUUK over its then thirty years of existence, A. Tait (2000) defined the functions of student support as

- ‘Cognitive: supporting and developing learning through the mediation of the standard and uniform elements of course materials and learning resources for individual students;
- Affective: providing an environment which supports students, creates commitment and enhances self-esteem; and
- Systemic: establishing administrative procedures and information management systems which are effective, transparent and overall student-friendly. (A. Tait, 2000, p. 289).

While Tait does not make direct reference here to the role of tutors and their competences and skills in achieving the full range of student support measures, we argue that the tutor plays a crucial role in each of the areas described by Tait. For example, the tutor is central in providing individualised feedback to the learners which is an important part of the cognitive learning process. Tutors provide pastoral care and are often the first point of contact when the student faces difficulties in their learning process, which relates both to the affective and the systemic functions of student support.

Although Tait’s contribution was originally at an organisational level, it laid the foundation for further, more detailed definition of the tutors’ role in distance learning. O’Rourke (2003), basing her suggestions on the experiences she had with an effective writing course, used Tait’s conceptual framework and elaborated on the concept. She wrote about metacognitive and motivational support, defining metacognitive support as helping ‘learners [to] develop more effective approaches to learning and recognise the significance of what has been learned and how it can be applied in different contexts.’ (O’Rourke, 2003, p. 146). Motivational support is, for her, about using all forms of modern communication to maintain regular contact between tutor and students. Metacognitive support as a sub-category does not differ significantly from Tait’s original cognitive function; equally it can be argued that O’Rourke’s sub-category of motivational support is already adequately represented in the affective function, which is reduced to an acknowledgment of learners having faced challenging situations in her definition of affective support. What she demonstrates is the notion that modern communication tools can support regular dialogue between tutors and students.

Tait’s framework was taken up by Mishra (2005) in work carried out at the Indira Gandhi National Open University in India (IGNOU), providing a substantial literature review, expert consultation, and feedback from practitioners. Mishra uses the term ‘academic counsellor’ in his article which reflected the major debate held at the OUUK in the 1970s about the dual role of counsellor and tutor (Sewart, 1978 quoted in Mishra, 2005, p. 148). Mishra states that ‘tutors are called academic
counsellor’ at IGNOU (ibid.) who fulfil both the cognitive and affective dimensions of student support which, in effect, reflects the current role of the tutor, or Associate Lecturer, at the OUUK. His multiple research method approach generated a list of generic competencies that are required for distance tutors, in three different categories: knowledge requirements, skill developments, practitioner learning (see Mishra, 2005, p. 155-6). Mishra stipulated that the role of the tutor at IGNOU covers the cognitive and affective functions of Tait’s concept. However, by including items such as ‘knowledge of the systems and procedures of the university’ (Mishra, 2005, p. 156) it is apparent that the role of the tutor, according to Mishra, includes the systemic function. Mishra’s findings evidently map onto Tait’s original framework. Mishra was concentrating on staff development and training at IGNOU. Through using different methodologies, Mishra produced both clear categories of competencies, as well as a comprehensive and very detailed list of the required attributes of distance tutors from a staff development and training perspective.

Although more limited in its methodology, Ally (2000) provides a list of main areas of responsibilities for a tutor. Ally conducted a workshop with tutors at Athabasca University (Canada). These 29 tutors were drawn from multiple disciplines and were asked ‘what they do when they tutor learners in a distance delivery environment’ (Ally, 2000, p. 31). The items which arose from this process map roughly onto the three categories of cognitive, affective and systemic student support. Apart from the practitioner focus in this study, the particular value, despite its reasonably small scale, lies in its interdisciplinary basis and the emphasis on the use of technology.

On the basis of what appears to be limited research evidence, in a handbook for global use, the Commonwealth of Learning (2003) suggests the competences and skills of an ideal tutor be as follows:

‘The ideal tutor is a paragon: she or he is consistent, fair, professional in standards and attitudes, encouraging but honest, unbiased, kind, positive, respectful and accepting of students’ ideas, patient, personal, tolerant, appreciative, understanding and helpful. Marking by a tutor of this sort will provide the best possible feedback, a crucial, and for most learners, central part of the learning process.’ (Commonwealth of Learning, 2003, p. 35)

This seems to be an over-idealised vision of a tutor – of more practical assistance are the definitions of the core of Open and Distance Learning tutoring skills which are grouped under four general headings on the basis of feedback from ODL educators drawing on their personal, local experience:

– ‘supportive: helping learners deal with issues not related to content that may affect their learning
– guiding: helping learners to understand the content and its relationship to the learning goals
– enabling: helping learners to develop and apply appropriate learning processes effectively
New challenges

– administrative: serving as a link between learners and institution on administrative issues.’ (Commonwealth of Learning, 2003, p. 39).

Clearly these headings map onto the framework developed by Tait, although his work is not mentioned, and the perspective here is on the practitioner.

Ayachji-Ghannouchi and Cheniti-Belcadhi classified tutor functions in an experiment they carried out within the CoseLearn (Coopération Suisse en E-Learning) programme, which offers a Mastère International spécialisé en E-Learning (MIEL).

(Ayachji-Ghannouchi and Cheniti-Belcadhi, 2007). Based on a sample of 29 students and two tutors, they described tutor functions as fonction organisationnelle, fonction pédagogique, fonction métacognitive, fonction evaluation, fonction technique and fonction socio-motivationnelle, which echo the definition of skills in Tait’s work described above.

1.3. The role of the tutor and technology

Since the advent of open and distance learning, technology and its potential have always featured prominently in production and delivery. Over the last decade the pace of change in technology generally and in ODL in particular has accelerated tremendously. It has been argued that we are at the brink of a major paradigm shift with elearning as a key factor (see Teo Siew Chin and Williams, 2006) and that ‘networked technologies, such as the Internet and the WWW have been called ‘transformational’ because of their wide ranging impact’ (Salmon, 2003, p. vii). While many technological advances have related to the use of different media and delivery methods (from vinyl to DVD), the new technological revolution through the introduction of networked technologies and virtual learning environments will have a profound effect on the interaction of the learner with the institution and with her or his learning which consequently transforms the role of the tutor.

There are particular challenges in introducing new technologies. On the one hand there are issues around students’ expectations and acceptance of new technology for learning, as Aylward (2003), for instance, highlighted. She described problems with the introduction of Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) at the OUHK, where students were reluctant to make use of CMC. She consequently identified the need for better pedagogical training of tutors so that they had the skills to lead discussions and answer questions on the electronic discussion board, organise on-line tutorials, handle tutor-marked assignments on-line and answer emails. On the other hand, Gaskell and Mills (2007) identify the same challenge with regard to full-time and part-time staff at the OUUK: ‘One of the difficulties faced by the OU in 2007 is that fewer people, whether full or part-time, have the expertise and time, in a rapidly changing online environment, even to engage with the very latest technology – and this itself is a prerequisite for developing its potential for learning and teaching.’ (Gaskell and Mills, 2007).
The implications of tutoring online, including the role of the tutors, have been considered among others by Palloff and Pratt (1999), Mason (2003) and Thorpe (2002, 2003). Some publications on online tutoring emphasize the practical aspects (e.g. Cornelius and Higgison, 2000; Davies, 2003; Duggleby, 2000; Macdonald, 2006; McPherson and Nunes, 2004; Salmon, 2003), while other work relates specifically to the training of online tutors (Bennett and Marsh, 2002; Gray et al, 2004; Macdonald and Hills, 2005). Anderson et al (2001) and Garrison and Anderson (2003) classified teaching roles in e-learning as instructional design, facilitating discourse and direct instruction (Anderson et al, 2001; Garrison and Anderson, 2003 p. 66). This idea was developed further by Anderson (2008), though he took a broader view of the roles of the tutor (described here as ‘teacher’). ‘First, teachers design and organise the learning experience that takes place, both before the establishment of the learning community and during its operation. Second, teaching involves devising and implementing activities to encourage discourse between and among students, between the teacher and the student, and between individual students, groups of students and content resources. Third, the teaching role goes beyond moderating the learning experiences when the teacher adds subject-matter expertise through a variety of forms of direct instruction’. (Anderson, 2008, p. 344-345)

Salmon (2003) developed the concept of e-moderators which she defines as ‘…the new generation of teachers and trainers who work with learners online’ (Salmon, 2003, p. vii). She suggests that ‘successful online learning depends on teachers and trainers acquiring new competencies, on their becoming aware of its potential and on their inspiring the learners, rather than mastering the technology.’ (ibid.). It is arguable whether e-tutors will be able to acquire new competencies in these e-learning environments without mastering the technology both for their own and their learners’ benefits (see Hampel and Stickler, 2005).

How are these new competencies defined by Salmon? She distinguishes between five different areas necessary for an e-moderator

- Understanding of online process;
- Technical skills;
- Online communication skills;
- Content expertise and
- Personal characteristics (Salmon, 2003, p. 54-55).

Salmon’s categories are mirrored closely in the work of McPherson and Nunes (2004) who define their categories in the terms of roles. Darabi et al. (2006) provide a detailed breakdown of competencies for distance teaching, generating a list of 20 competencies for online distance instructors which was then prioritised according to how practitioners felt they performed.

- Employ appropriate presentation strategies
- Exhibit effective communication skills
- Facilitate productive discussions
- Ensure appropriate communication
- Provide learners with course-level guidelines
New challenges

– Employ appropriate types of interaction
– Provide timely and informative feedback
– Assess learning based on stated goals
– Stimulate learners’ critical thinking
– Monitor learner progress
– Evaluate effectiveness of course
– Encourage learners to become self-directed
– Manage logistical aspects of course
– Foster a learning community
– Create a friendly and open environment
– Use various methods of distance education
– Assist learners in becoming acclimated
– Use relevant technology effectively
– Accommodate problems with technology
– Improve own professional knowledge.’

(Darabi et al., 2006, p. 113)

This echoes the student support framework that Tait developed, as these competencies could be subsumed into the three functions that Tait identified: cognitive, affective and systemic. Although related to tutoring in online environments the competencies are very similar to standard distance teaching settings.

1.4. The tutor and teaching languages at a distance

White is one of the very few educationalists to offer an extensive discussion about teacher roles and responsibilities in the distance teaching of languages (White, 2003). She argues that tutors new to the distance teaching environment require new strategies and skills in order to tutor successfully. She identifies three main areas of unfamiliarity: communication and interaction, awareness of skills (and self-identification of training needs) and the scale of processes in the development and delivery of distance teaching. A collection of studies on the subject of distance education and languages was published in 2005 (Holmberg, Shelley and White) which included some discussion of the role of the tutor in the provision of feedback (Ros i Solé and Truman). They concluded that ‘...tutors must engage students in a dialogue and give them some degree of ownership over the feedback process... DL tutors must engage with learners as individuals, helping them to situate their newly acquired knowledge, skills and understanding in a framework of experience and abilities that students have constructed over the years (Ros i Solé and Truman, 2005, p. 88-89).

1.5. The tutor and teaching languages online

In recent years a number of publications have been dedicated specifically to the role of the tutor in online distance language teaching. In the report of a workshop...
held to explore the role and significance of online teachers, Goodyear et al. (2001) defined the roles involved in online teaching as Content facilitator, Technologist, Designer, Manager/administrator, Process facilitator, Adviser/counsellor, Assessor and Researcher. Discussing more than just the role of the tutor, Felix (2003a, 2003b) raises the question of learner versus instructor control and the importance of authentic assessment as well as time management in online tutoring. Ernest and Hopkins (2006) report on their experience in developing online tutors at the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya, where they looked in particular at features such as presence in the classroom, the language used in their messages, and at specific classroom activities and exercises. There is a considerable body of research on online tutoring based on experience at the OU UK (Hampel, 2003, 2006; Hampel and Baber, 2003; Hampel et al., 2005; Hampel and Stickler, 2005; Hauck and Hampel, 2005; Hauck and Stickler, 2006; Lamy and Hampel, 2007; Lamy, 2004; Lamy and Goodfellow, 1999; Lewis, 2006; Stickler and Hampel, 2007). Hampel and Stickler (2005) provide (Figure 1) a useful hierarchy of the skills needed by the online tutor of languages which starts with basic ICT competences as the foundation and the tutor’s own style at the top of the pyramid.

Figure 1. (Hampel and Stickler, 2005, p. 317)
Baumann et al. (2006) reported on the particular e-competencies needed for tutoring languages at a distance from the perspective of practitioners.

So far, this paper has looked at the role and competences of tutors in distance education, the role of language tutors in online environments and generally in distance language courses. The following section explores very briefly the roles and competences of language tutors in traditional classroom settings and developments over the last decade, since although the delivery method of the teaching is different, the two approaches (classroom and online/distance) have much in common. Also, the vast majority of distance language teachers will have experience of the classroom, and will naturally seek opportunities to transfer their skills.

1.6. Classroom teachers of languages

In the published literature there is a substantial body of work dealing with the skills and expertise required by teachers of languages, for example Brosh, 1996; Grenfell et al., 2003; Hammadou and Bernhardt, 1987; Klapper, 2005, 2006, Richards, 1998 and Richards and Farrell, 2005, among others. Notably, Borg (2003, 2006) has made the case that language teaching differs from teaching in other disciplines in a number of respects. He points out that ‘…the notion of language teachers’ characteristics is complex and multi-dimensional…’ (Borg, 2006, p. 7). In a summary, Borg highlights ‘a range of perspectives from which language teachers’ distinctiveness may be perceived’ (Borg, 2006, p. 23). Among them are the nature of the subject, the content of teaching, teacher-learner relationships and the question of operating in a non-native language (Borg, 2006, p. 24).

Grenfell et al. (2003) also highlight the preoccupation in the literature with professional skills and attributes and the question as to how such professional skills can be acquired (Grenfell et al., 2003, p. 20-21). Among the various models discussed is the Competence Based Teacher Education model (CBTE). Grenfell et al. list seven areas of knowledge that teachers have to develop

- Content Knowledge
- General Pedagogic Knowledge
- Curriculum Knowledge
- Pedagogical Content Knowledge
- Knowledge of Learners and their Characteristics
- Knowledge of Educational Contexts
- Knowledge of Educational Ends

(Grenfell et al. 2003, p. 31).

Heyworth et al. (2003) come up with a similar list of knowledge and skills relevant for the language educator which included different knowledge and skills, ranging from subject-specific to workplace- and society-connected knowledge and skills (Heyworth et al., 2003, p. 78-89).
2. The research project

In her discussion of the roles and responsibilities of distance language tutors cited above, White suggested that a detailed study of the competencies required by distance language teachers is a high priority within the field. It would provide a useful source of information for novice teachers, and could be used as the basis for professional development and training (White, 2003, p. 69). White developed this further when she explored the identity shifts required of tutors as they embark on working in distance environments and how new technologies and innovation present new challenges (White, 2007). In response to this suggestion, and in the light of the scarcity of available research into the tutor role in distance language learning, a collaborative project, based in the OUUK, was established. This focussed on the attributes, skills and expertise needed by the distance tutor of languages who conducts tutorials, either face-to-face or via a computer-mediated audiographic conferencing system, and provides feedback to continuous assessment.

2.1. Methodology and outcomes

The overarching aims of the project were to

– articulate the professional background and expertise which are required of distance language teaching professionals
– gain insights into the nature of the professional practice in the field
– provide a basis for future professional development
– address the paucity of research in this important area.

This project has been conceptualised and carried out by a small team of academics from the OUUK and Massey University, New Zealand and included academics who work on the design and development of distance courses in languages as well as having responsibility for the delivery of the tuition and the management of the part-time teaching staff.

2.2. The context: languages at the OUUK

The Department of Languages at the Open University, UK offers courses in French, German, Italian and Spanish, the majority ranging from beginners’ to graduate level, and a degree in Modern Language Studies. These courses can count towards a variety of other named degrees in the OUUK, such as Humanities, European Studies, and International Studies. As of 2008, there were over 8000 students registered on the language courses, giving the OUUK a substantial market share of the part-time language study market in the UK. Tuition and direct student contact is carried out via a network of thirteen regions, as is the line management of the tutors, whose ‘main
function is to establish a personal link with students, providing guidance, scaffolding, feedback, assessment and support’ (White, 2006, p. 253).

The courses follow the well-established Open and Distance Learning model of supported self-study with course books as their core, audio and video materials (now gradually being replaced by interactive DVD-ROMs) and other supplementary materials. Currently, the University is developing a comprehensive virtual learning environment which means that future courses are likely to make extensive use of online learning. As in 2008, students are offered up to 21 hours of instruction throughout the academic year, delivered face-to-face or online via a computer-mediated audiographic conferencing system. The Department is in the process of migrating all new and existing courses to a model of blended tuition which replaces the separation of face-to-face and online conferencing by a mixture of face-to-face, synchronous and asynchronous online tuition which will enable greater interactivity among students and tutors. This instruction is not compulsory, but highly recommended so as to give students the opportunity to practise those skills that are more challenging to master on one’s own. The changes require, of course, that tutors not only be expert in teaching languages at a distance, but also be competent in operating these systems, and able to support students who are using them.

2.3. Research perspectives

As has been demonstrated in the discussion of the literature, writings on the roles and competencies required to teach programmes at a distance have tended to be developed from the point of view of the institution or researchers, with relatively few studies drawing on the perspectives and experiences of those very closely involved – namely tutors or other staff. Recent work on the skills required in distance education has generally been carried out from three perspectives, that of an ‘expert panel’ of distance education professionals (Williams, 2003), of researchers (Denis et al., 2004) and of novice teachers (Cadorath, Harris and Encinas, 2002). Each of these approaches can provide useful insights, but in response to Lentell’s dictum that the voice of the tutor is often ‘unheard’ (Lentell, 1994) this project concentrated on tutors.

2.4. Research approaches

The study developed around an unfolding research design (White, Murphy, Shelley, and Baumann, 2005). The project incorporates a series of stages, allowing opportunities for consultation and reflection. In designing the study, a range of elicitation techniques have been used to explore tutor perspectives on the attributes and expertise required of them in their teaching role, and findings are explored further in subsequent phases. The choice of elicitation procedures and reflective techniques for each stage was not predetermined, but was based on what was emerging within the data and the new lines of enquiry that were opening up. The
stages of the research process, together with data-gathering procedures and participants, are outlined below in Table 1.

**Table 1. Stages of research process, data-gathering procedures, and participants**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Data-gathering procedure</th>
<th>participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stage 1</td>
<td>focus groups, brainstorming techniques</td>
<td>tutors from one OUUK region (N=19)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage 2</td>
<td>open-ended questionnaires, + yoked subject technique: Individual responses</td>
<td>as for Stage 1 (N=17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage 3</td>
<td>group interpretation and and discussion of revised A &amp;E statements, discussion of tutor maxims and professional development formats</td>
<td>as for Stage 1 (N=20)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Stage 4</td>
<td>individual responses to revised A &amp; E statements</td>
<td>tutors in other OUUK regions (N=32)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage 5</td>
<td>interviews</td>
<td>academics with tutor management and course development roles</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A & E statements = Attribute and expertise statements

Attributes covers the characteristics, capability or perceived quality of an individual which could mean attitude, ability, behaviour, skill, knowledge or interest. Expertise is taken to mean skill or knowledge in a particular area. They are grouped together, given the widespread finding in the wider education domain that categories such as knowledge, beliefs and conceptions of teaching are inextricably entwined in the minds of teachers (see, for instance Verloop, Van Driel and Meijer, 2001).

3. Findings

3.1. **Stage 1: Tutor focus groups**

This stage involved tutors from one of the OUUK regions, who tutored in German, French, and Spanish. Some of the participants were native speakers of the target language and all of them brought a wide range of experience to their work with the OUUK. During a Staff Development Day for language tutors, tutors met in three groups to discuss what they regarded to be the knowledge, skills, and attitudes required to fulfil their roles, using brain-storming techniques; these included Brain writing, the Snowball technique, and the Gallery (Open University, 2000). Tutors responded first individually, then discussed and categorised the individual findings in groups.
The initial findings from the three groups were analysed by the project team, classified, and refined to remove overlap and repetition. Additionally, the findings were supplemented by reference to relevant literature and the professional expertise of the project team. This proved to be necessary since one area, ICT for learning at a distance, had drawn very few comments from the tutors and, in view of the increasing importance of ICT for language learning and teaching needed to be expanded.

The following eight broad categories were identified:

- Qualities and affective orientation
- Pedagogical expertise
- Subject matter expertise
- IT skills
- One-to-one interactive support skills
- Self-management
- Group support and management
- Professional skills and responsibilities

Each of these categories contained further detailed sub-listings. The categories and sub-listings are given in the Appendix.

3.2. Stage 2: tutor responses and the yoked subject technique

The taxonomy developed from the preliminary research procedures was then scrutinized by the research team. In the process, the team raised concerns about the statements, as they appeared largely de-contextualised and codified, providing little indication of the interpretation or significance of each item, or how it functioned in practice. These issues led to the development of Stage 2. Here the same participants were asked to reflect on the importance of the statements. The research methodology used was a specially designed open-ended questionnaire which allowed for the exploration of tutors’ personal understandings of those attributes and expertise which underpin tutoring. An indirect technique (rather than just rating each statement in terms of importance) was employed to elicit further responses: the yoked subject technique (White, 1994). In this instance tutors were asked to imagine they were talking to a new tutor who wanted to know what was particularly important in distance language teaching and to make notes about what they would say. This technique generated more thoughtful and reflective responses in addition to straight ratings, such as are normally used in competency studies (for instance, see Williams, 2003).

The most important skill identified by this cohort of tutors was Design tutorial activities where student involvement predominates (under Group support and management). One said ‘Very important to allow students to make the most of tutorials. It’s the only time when students can communicate in the target language.’ Encouraging and supportive (listed under Qualities and effective orientation), was selected by over half of them. A tutor commented ‘Adult learners set themselves very high standards and even the most able can fall very hard if they don’t meet them. Students need to feel
they can admit to mistakes and that they are not alone in making them.’ Nearly half chose Provide unambiguous, individualised and prompt feedback using language at the appropriate level (under One-to-one interactive support skills). ‘Essential and the thing students seem to value most!’ was a typical comment here.

In their more reflective responses to this set of statements, the significant themes to emerge were the teacher-learner relationship; working with adult, self-directed learners; the significance of tutor support functions as opposed to ‘teaching’; contrasts with classroom language teaching and the implications of teaching languages rather than another discipline. One tutor said: ‘A face-to-face teacher has regular enforced contact with students. It’s easy to monitor progress and adapt teaching. Distance students are faced with the teaching materials as they are – may not like them or understand them or find them motivating. A class teacher can make inherently uninteresting materials interesting through human interaction (student: student or teacher: student) and students can get a buzz from lessons. This is unlikely with distance materials.’

The data were also analyzed with reference to Richards’ approach based on teaching maxims (Richards, 1998).

3.3. Tutor maxims

The analysis of the data showed that what we were working with were tutors’ implicit theories of tutoring – that is, their personal philosophy of what constitutes good instruction for distance language learning in their particular context. This is spelt out in the work of Richards (1998) who explored teacher maxims in face-to-face classrooms: ‘… teachers’ belief systems lead to the development of rational principles that serve as a source of how teachers interpret their responsibilities … These principles function like rules for best behaviour in that they guide the teachers’ selection of choices from among a range of alternatives. Hence they function as maxims that guide the teachers’ actions’ (Richards, 1998, p. 53-54).

As tutors responded to, interpreted, and elaborated on the attributes and expertise statements, choosing those which were personally meaningful or significant to them and which guided their practice, it was possible to identify maxims and define what that maxim meant, or the principles they embodied. Within the Stage 2 data, four maxims were identified: maxims of (1) empowerment; (2) appropriateness; (3) honesty; and (4) openness (White et al, 2005). The maxim of empowerment, for example, aimed at giving learners a sense of possibility and agency, was made in response to the attribute of ‘being able to use coaching or mentoring skills with students’ which, in Stage 2, was placed within a category relating to pedagogical expertise.

The maxim of openness focuses on being approachable to students, and was developed in relation to the category of the qualities and affective orientation which are required by tutors. Given that students are very often reluctant to make contact,
even when they have been reassured that tutors are there to assist, the tutor suggests that it is important to be proactive in establishing or maintaining contact, but that this should be done in a low-key way, drawing out the student experience in a relatively non-directive way.

At this stage the study moved from a process of identifying the attributes and expertise required to carry out the roles of a distance language tutor to one of articulating some of the maxims which point towards their underlying philosophy of tutoring and which also influence their practice. While the maxims were not seen as rules to be applied in all contexts and transferable across all boundaries, but as principles that individual tutors attempt to adhere to and to put into practice according to circumstances, it was decided that the maxim approach should be explored further in the next stage and in relation to professional development opportunities.

3.4. Stage 3: group discussion

The next stage of the research project was carried out in the same OUUK region as before. The aim in this stage was to give tutors an opportunity to reflect critically on the revised statements as a group, and to respond to the broad categories and individual items. The sample of tutors overlapped with that of Stage 1, with 20 tutors taking part in the group discussions about the statements. The revised version of the attributes and expertise statements had been circulated in advance so that tutors could familiarise themselves with it. The three group discussions were led by members of the project team. A second aim was to explore whether there were further maxims which contribute to their practices as tutors. The final, relatively brief part of the discussions explored ways in which the statements and the reflective processes used to date in the study could form part of professional development opportunities, the third of the research aims.

3.4.1. Group responses to the statements

The statements about attributes and expertise generated animated debate in each of the three groups, and proved a useful discussion starter for tutors with different levels of experience in teaching languages at a distance to explore their roles in a way for which they do not normally have either time or opportunity. An important theme which emerged from each of the three groups was the difference between face-to-face and distance teaching, reflecting many of the comments which had been generated in Stage 2. The vast majority of OU languages tutors have experienced both teaching contexts and, especially for those relatively new to teaching at a distance, this was an important discussion. The comparative discussion also allowed them to identify and explore other aspects, in particular teacher-learner relationships as in: 'It’s a unique role, because in the classroom it’s very much hands on, you’re there, they’re in front of you, they can consult you all through the lesson, on almost a day-to-day basis, whereas with something like this, it’s much more hands off . . .
they might be hundreds of miles away from you, so they’ve got to work by themselves to a large extent and we’ve got to work out how to help them’.

An important point of difference affecting teacher-learner relationships was seen to come from the adult-oriented nature of distance language teaching. The implications of distance for dealing with students and their potential isolation were highlighted, together with the fact that support functions play a distinctive and critical role in tutoring.

All these points could be raised by any distance teacher dealing with students who they may never see. But participants also identified particular challenges arising from teaching languages at a distance, in terms of methodology, one of which was how to deal with correcting students’ work:

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

The prominence of support functions referred to earlier was extended to include monitoring of progress and providing support for assignment work. Tutors voiced concerns that such functions meant they had insufficient time for actually teaching the language because the face-to-face tutorials and day schools (usually held at weekends) are comparatively infrequent. Another issue which can be a challenge with these classes of adult language learners is mixed ability, differences between learning needs and wishes, and the impact on teaching focus.

3.4.2. Maxims

While the tutors were keen to talk about the A & E statements, they found discussing the maxims that might lie behind those skills more difficult. The maxims which were suggested based on findings from Stage 2 were empowerment, appropriateness, honesty, and openness. Tutors felt that these wider concepts subsumed the specific skills and attitudes they used in their work, but they were generally unable to articulate further maxims apart from a fifth one, humility, which was seen as underpinning the development of respectful and productive teacher-learner relationships: ‘I mean humility of the tutor in the face of a student who is, after all, an intelligent human being perhaps with more intelligence and experience of the world than you have, so listen to the student, be prepared to learn from the student in some ways and really respect what they’re doing’.

3.4.3. Opportunities for staff development:

How the research process and research results could relate to professional development opportunities was the final point of discussion. Tutors were keen to see the outcomes from this project incorporated into media-based training materials to be made generally available to all staff with teaching roles. Including the ‘voices' of
3.5. Stage 4: wider consultation

Up until this point, the tutors involved in the research project were located in just one region of the OUUK. To widen the scope of the research project, and to check whether there were any differences between tutors in different parts of the United Kingdom, tutors in other OUUK regions were invited to reflect on the importance of the A & E statements and add comments in the same way as had been done for the original sample in Stage 2. Overall, the feedback from this wider sample reflected the same emphases as for the more limited group of tutors. Two are particularly worthy of mention here. First was the comment that ‘isolation is as much a problem for tutors as students’ suggesting that ongoing peer support where tutors can share their perspectives and experiences may be as important as access to professional development opportunities. This comment was reinforced by research carried out in South Africa with tutors at the University of South Africa (Unisa) (Fouche, 2006), where a survey which included both quantitative and qualitative data evaluated different ways of reducing tutors’ feelings of isolation. The second dimension concerned the need for tutors to constantly renew their knowledge so they are up-to-date with cultural and linguistic development of the target language.

3.6. Stage 5: interviews with colleagues

Stage 5, the most recent phase of the project, involved a shift in focus to staff tutor colleagues and academics responsible for developing teaching materials. A series of interview questions were developed to explore such issues as to how they had become distance language teachers; what differences they perceived between face-to-face and distance teaching; details of their work; issues, challenges, and constraints they faced in their work; opportunities they took for staff development; and how they saw the future for teaching languages at a distance. The opening part of the interview asked them to comment on the statements. Their comments fell into three broad categories. First, the need to manage affective aspects of the role, such as feelings of isolation, and frustration at losing students through attrition. Time featured as an important constraint and professional and organisational concerns such as the degree of commitment required were also expressed. As to the future, high hopes were expressed of a ‘virtual community’ for tutors via the Internet and course conferences, and the hope that technology could be used to improve and enable more sophisticated, instant feedback.
4. Discussion

The outcomes from this research relate clearly to the three functions of student support in teaching at a distance outlined by A. Tait (2000, p. 289). The broad categories identified by the tutors who took part in this project could all be grouped under his headings (cognitive, affective and systemic) (see Table 2).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cognitive</th>
<th>Affective</th>
<th>Systemic</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pedagogical expertise</td>
<td>Qualities and affective orientation</td>
<td>IT skills</td>
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<tr>
<td>Subject matter expertise</td>
<td>One-to-one interactive support skills</td>
<td>Self-management</td>
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<tr>
<td>IT skills</td>
<td>Group support and management</td>
<td>Group support and management</td>
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<tr>
<td>Group support and management</td>
<td>Professional skills and responsibilities</td>
<td>Professional skills and responsibilities</td>
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Some categories could be classified under more than one heading, which is not surprising as these are complex activities, requiring a combination of skills and expertise. Professional skills and responsibilities can be used as an example to illustrate this. This category contains both cognitive and systemic elements, for instance the sub-heading ‘To know the course materials well’ can be classified as cognitive, while ‘Advise students on what they can do locally to improve their learning experience’ falls under the heading of systemic. So Tait’s framework is reflected in the self-perception of what tutors felt was required of them in distance teaching.

A comparison of the skills and expertise identified by the distance language tutors in this project with those described earlier in this article (Stevenson and Sander, 1998, Stevenson et al, 2000, 2006; Fung and Carr, 1999; Egan and Akdere, 2005; Mishra, 2005; Ally, 2000; Commonwealth of Learning, 2003) demonstrates that a tutor of languages at a distance has much in common with those tutoring other subjects. This is equally true when tutoring online (see Salmon, 2003; Darabi et al, 2006; Hampel and Stickler, 2005). The range of skills needed fit into Tait’s suggested framework well (Tait, 2000). These tutors of languages shared many of the skills and expertise needed to work in an open and distance learning environment with other tutors with one notable and important difference: the subject specialism. The subject is unique as it requires the tutor to teach through the medium of the subject and to teach particular features of languages, such as the teaching of grammar and pronunciation. The skills required of tutors who work within the distance teaching of languages differ markedly from their classroom counterparts. This is apparent from a comparison of Grenfell et al’s seven areas of knowledge (Grenfell et al 2003) and the suggestions from Heyworth et al (2003) with the list given in the Appendix. The roles they assume, the way in
which they interact with students and the attributes and expertise required of them are not identical. All these dimensions have changed and will continue to change rapidly in response to shifts in technology and the development of virtual learning environments, and in line with political and institutional factors such as the availability of funding and quality control procedures. This emerges clearly from White’s work on innovation and identity in distance learning (White, 2007) where she concludes ‘As distance language teaching expands, it is imperative for the field to find ways of addressing the philosophical, pedagogical and professional issues that arise in a rapidly changing environment, with teacher identity as a significant factor in each of these domains.’ (White, 2007, p. 107).

The research cycle developed here has involved the tutors, giving them a voice and offering them the opportunity to articulate their professionalism in the context of the teaching of language at a distance at a leading distance university. By putting emphasis on tutors in this manner, the perceived undervaluing of tutors, as described by J. Tait (2004) and Lentell (1994, 2003), has been counterbalanced since they are the focus of this investigation. The unfolding research design has been found to be particularly valuable, since it allows for flexibility and develops and maintains contact with tutor participants, giving them feedback on the research process and findings from each stage. Subsequent stages of research have extended the process to include more tutors and other distance language teaching professionals.

Overall, the original aims of the project have been met. Tutors have been given extensive opportunities to articulate those skills and expertise they deem necessary (on the basis of their experience in this field) to perform well in their role as distance education tutors and unique insights have been gained into the nature of professional practice in the field.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study of the attributes and expertise required by distance language tutors working in a leading distance education university is a promising domain of enquiry, and highlights several additional lines of research which have the potential to expand our understanding of the field. First of all, there is a considerable need to explore the ways in which language tutor attributes and expertise develop and change, not only as tutors acquire more experience, but as they enter new environments, particularly online environments and virtual support networks. Then there is a need to explore the relationship between tutor reflection and practice, that is the relationship between how tutors reflect on, and articulate their attributes and expertise and how this relates to what actually happens in interaction with students. A further challenge is to explore more deeply how processes of critical reflection on practice can best be incorporated into professional development opportunities and tutor support networks. The tutors who contributed to this project were particularly enthusiastic about this possibility, as they wanted to gain an understanding of, and
increase their awareness of their practice. A rewarding aspect of the research process has been the extent to which tutors appreciated and engaged with the range of opportunities to reflect on the qualities they had developed, the way these related to aspects of their practice, and the value they placed on developing optimal teaching-learning relationships with students. Students are, of course, an essential part of the equation and their views must be sought to complete this research. In addition to the work already carried out in other institutions with other subjects (Fung and Carr, 1999; Stevenson et al., 2000; Egan and Akdere, 2005) a further project to investigate what students want from their language tutors in the OUUK is currently underway.

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7. Appendix. Main categories and sub-categories of skills and competencies as listed by tutors

**Qualities and affective orientation**

Flexible  
Open-minded  
Enthusiastic  
Committed  
Patient  
Respecting individuals  
Positive  
Attentive  
Approachable  
Encouraging and Supportive

**Pedagogical expertise**

Give examples  
Offer useful language models  
Take account of different learning styles  
Encourage students to locate and use resources in their environment  
Adapt flexibly to needs that may arise  
Differentiate/cater for a variety of needs  
Assist development of pronunciation  
Manage groups flexibly/with variety  
Respond to developments in methodology

**Subject matter expertise**

Understand how learners learn grammar  
Provide appropriate help with grammar  
Be up-to-date with cultural developments in target language countries  
Have native or near native competency  
Be up-to-date with current linguistic developments in target language countries  
Be aware of linguistic diversity in target language  
Have knowledge of the countries and cultures where language is spoken  
Be aware of cultural differences

**IT skills**

Have computer literacy skills  
Use web resources for communication and information between individual, institution and learner  
Use e-mail (First Class) for communication with learners and institution  
Use text/audio conferencing
Optimize/integrate online learning with other support
Be aware of relevant online resources.

**One-to-one interactive support skills**

Establish a friendly atmosphere
Adapt to students’ language levels
Provide unambiguous, individualised and prompt feedback using language at the appropriate level
In feedback give specific advice and/or examples
Understand learners’ needs/strengths and provide appropriate support
Offer extra support where necessary
Reassure
Make students feel they matter and are not on their own
Give honest feedback
Keep in touch regularly

**Self-management**

Be well-organised with records/materials
Respond promptly to student queries
Sort out problems and difficulties quickly
Exercise discipline in time keeping
Prioritise

**Group management and support skills**

Establish a friendly and communicative atmosphere
Allow space for students to think/talk
Explain mistakes clearly in a non-threatening manner
Design tutorial activities where student involvement predominates
Put students in touch with each other if desired.

**Professional skills and responsibilities**

Know the course materials well
Seek students’ feedback on all aspects of tuition
Advise students on what they can do locally to improve their learning experience
Help/facilitate/inform students about self-directed learning
Know when to refer a problem on to other support service
Help students to review their ways of working regularly
Know what is expected from students for assignments/exams and tell them
Be well-informed about organisational procedures, for example, late submission.