



Developing Online Language Teaching: Research-based Pedagogies and Reflective Practices

ISBN: 978-1-137-41225-6

**Edited by Regine Hampel and Ursula Stickler
Basingstoke, UK & New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015**

**Reviewed by Raymond Sheehan,
Assistant Professor, Zayed University, Abu Dhabi, UAE**

Developing Online Language Teaching does far more for the cause of learner autonomy than its title might initially suggest. This book is certainly rich in detail that will facilitate self-training in technical skills sets for self-directed language teachers keen to effect a transition from face-to-face teaching to teaching online. The most powerful boundary-pushing aspect of the book, however, is its sociocultural and constructivist ethos. This book is about teachers and learners building new worlds, new learning environments, to be co-constructed at several levels. What is most exciting, from a 'learner autonomy' point of view is that it provides us with innovative theoretical and pedagogical frameworks to help us theorize and exemplify the changing nature of learner autonomy as learners gain access to learning opportunities within ever-increasing social online contexts which were not available to learners a generation before.

Of the book's eleven chapters, **Chapters 1 (the Introduction), 4 and 9** most clearly articulate the principles or ethos of this collection. After the introduction in **Chapter 1, Regine Hampel in Theoretical Approaches and Research-based Pedagogies for Online Teaching (Chapter 9)** provides a powerful starting point. Hampel sees second language learning as "learning a social practice by using the language in communication with other speakers" (p. 135). The researcher into learner autonomy will now have to develop a theory and methods to understand how the learner is constructing, and interacting in, new contexts, learning new rules of engagement and manipulating

new tools and media for communication. A sound point of departure for autonomy research is the statement that: "Sociocultural theory links individual mental processes with the cultural, institutional and historical context and emphasizes the role of cultural mediation in the development of higher psychological functions (for example, thinking, reasoning, self-awareness, or the use of signs such as language)" (p. 135). Hampel refers to Lantolf (2006) to single out three cultural factors that play a role in such mediation between individual learner and context: activities, artifacts and concepts. The exploratory potential for tracking the progress of the autonomous learner in a new learning environment is enormous here. For example, it may focus on how self-awareness and the development of an online identity, facilitated by specific activities and the artifacts of technology, might also facilitate autonomous language learning. The learner ceases to be mainly a learner and becomes an online user with authentic individualized purposes in purposeful online communities. In such communities, teachers have a mediating role in enabling learners to engage more competently and autonomously with their enlarged learning contexts, making their own learning decisions about what, how and when.

Linda Murphy's Chapter 4, Online Language Teaching: The Learner's Perspective is a research-based study of how learners view the transition from face-to-face to online learning. Her investigation leads her to conclude that "learners have a clear view of the need to adapt practices and

transform existing skills to create effective relationships in online teaching” (p. 61). The practices and skills she refers to are teaching skills. While learners clearly value a teacher who has the technical know-how to support their learning and solve problems, what learners may value most (as in a language classroom) is teaching involvement “in creating and sustaining social and cognitive presence, encouraging an open and constructive learner-teacher relationship and helping to boost learner satisfaction” (pp. 60-61). Learners value teachers who are present within a structured online learning space, where learners can operate with confidence not just technically but cognitively, socially and linguistically. In such a structured learning space, learners can feel free to explore with judicious support, in order to make their own social connections and cognitive syntheses while mapping out their own language-learning highways and byways. This chapter, like **Chapter 9**, has the potential to generate much further research into the social, cognitive and affective roles of teachers, learners and members of online communities in fostering learner autonomy in a context where the role of the teacher has changed.

Chapter 5 provides a principled starting-point in enabling teachers to reflect upon and identify their own training needs. **Stickler and Hampel**, in **Transforming Teaching: New Skills for Online Language Learning Spaces** identify three key skills areas for teacher development. First, there needs to be an ongoing “awareness of the affordances of different media and the intercultural dimensions of online materials in order to transform online spaces into online learning spaces” (p. 64). Secondly, teachers need to be able to identify, exploit and adapt the most appropriate online learning tools and materials. Thirdly, and most importantly, from the point of view of learner autonomy, teachers with an online presence need “skill in encouraging their learners to take responsibility for their selection of learning spaces and activities and engage in the negotiation of suitable spaces and their appropriate use for online language learning” (p. 64). The chapter also has a very welcome section (pp. 72-74) on the under-researched area of enhancing creativity online and mentions seven skills, hierarchically arranged, that will enable the teacher to transform learners’ experience. There are

authentic opportunities for learners to become authors (e.g. of fanfiction), translators, editors etc.

This book makes it clear that the language teacher in these new contexts needs to learn at least as vigorously as the language learner. Seven of the book’s authors have been involved in the DOTS project: Developing Online Teaching Skills. Developed by the European Centre for Modern Languages, the DOTS project stresses the supportive collaborative nature of professional development and also accepts that the modules must provide maximum returns for a teacher’s investment in professional-development time. “The main characteristics of the activities are that they are modular and designed for immediate implementation in the language classroom, they foster teacher reflection and sharing with others and they are open” (p. 161). **Chapters 2, 10 and 11** in this book give detailed accounts of the DOTS project and researched reports of teachers’ experiences with the project.

Realistically, the time, and financial means, to construct new learning worlds online, may seem a luxury only to be dreamed of. In **Chapter 3, Part-time and Freelance Language Teachers and Their ICT Training Needs** **Stickler and Emke** point out the challenges in a world where teaching as a profession is becoming increasingly undervalued, while institutional and governmental demands on teachers to keep up-to-date with professional development increase in inverse proportion. For example, the *Volkshochschule* in Germany “employs 187,000 part-time teachers and only 3,247 full-time teaching staff” (p. 29). Part-time teachers are “almost invisible: marginalized in the profession, under-researched in studies, and under-represented in the literature” (p. 36). The issue of their teacher-identity is a rich area for investigation, suggested in this chapter. This book can certainly help them make “a shift from a fractured or shifted identity towards a fully developed professional identity” (p. 42) by pointing towards free, open, flexible and easily accessible sources of development online. It cannot, however, hope to solve the injustices perpetrated upon that body of professionals with the greatest transformative power to shape future global citizens for the better.

In addition to those chapters outlining the DOTS project, **Chapters 6, 7 and 8** will guide readers, whatever their entry point, towards collaborative web-based sources for professional development. **Joseph Hopkins** in **Chapter 6, Free Online Training Spaces for Language Teachers** constructs a useful typology of sources which will suit a large range of users at different entry levels: self-training modules; MOOCs (Massive Online Open Courses); directories of online tools; tools training by language teacher trainers and online communities of practice. **Anna Comas-Quinn and Kate Borthwick** in **Chapter 7, Sharing: Open Educational Resources for Language Teachers**, state that “research has shown that awareness and use of OER are still low among language professionals” (p. 99) and their chapter makes a detailed awareness-raising contribution to the volume. **Aline Germain-Rutherford** in **Chapter 8, Online Communities of Practice: A Professional Development Tool for Language Educators** explores both the advantages and challenges of belonging in such communities. This chapter will in fact be very useful not only for those seeking membership, but also for those seeking to construct online communities of practice for purposeful self-directed collaborative professional development.

This book comes highly recommended. For those of us who wish to research learner autonomy in new sociocultural and constructivist contexts, it suggests ways to conceptualize and exemplify learner and teacher experience in relatively unexplored social contexts. Additionally, given the modular nature of the book, teacher trainers can choose a chapter or sequence of chapters which will encourage discussion, individual or collaborative exploration, pedagogical innovation and action research.

In fact, each chapter provides exemplars of and encourages action research and each concludes with a valuable reflective task of benefit to all users of this book. The emphasis on action research is salutary in an area which is still being co-constructed, reformulated and extended. The book, overall, rightly claims to serve the needs of users in both formal and informal settings: whether trainees on a course or self-directed teachers with all combinations of pedagogical experience and technical competence interested in laying out their own pathways for professional development.

References

Lantolf, J.P. (2006) Sociocultural theory and L2: State of the art. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 28 (01), 67-109.

Notes on the editors

REGINA HEMPEL is Professor of Open and Distance Language Learning at the Open University, UK. Her research interests include the impact of new technologies on learning and teaching and their implications for teacher training.

URSULA STICKLER is Senior Lecturer in the Department of Languages at the Open University, UK. Her research explores autonomy and technology-enhanced language learning and preparing teachers and learners for online language learning.

Erratum

We sincerely apologise to Carolin Schneider whose review on Managing Self-access Language Learning was published in Issue 63 of *Independence* but was not listed among the contents on the front cover.