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Is there language teaching after global English?

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ABSTRACT

This study documents a case of language education decline, and the role that distance-teaching expertise, allied with Information and Communication Technology (ICT) experience, can play in alleviating the problem. In the United Kingdom a number of factors have led to a crisis in the teaching and learning of European Languages Other Than English (ELOTE). One of the main determiners is the dominance of English as a *lingua franca* for Continental Western European countries, and another the political reluctance of the part of British governments to engage fully with the European Union. In the country where English is the mother tongue, the position of ELOTE is particularly critical. After quantifying the decline in demand for these languages, I will look at different ways in which language-teaching professionals have attempted to fight back, and I will focus on the benefits that may be derived from a strategy that combines ICT capacity with distance-learning methodologies, using the UK Open University (UKOU) as an example. The lessons drawn by that institution in different discipline areas over two decades will be applied to languages.

Introduction

The demand for the learning of ELOTE is in a state of profound change in several countries of Europe, and nowhere more so than in the United Kingdom. I will observe this evolution and I will describe the responses that governments and institutions have attempted to bring into play, at different levels of the education sector. Some of these responses are defeatist (for example closing university departments or merging them), and others wildly optimistic (for example financing the creation of online resources for teachers, then expecting teachers to train themselves to teach with these). I will look at how languages are taught at the UK Open University (UKOU). One of the more reasoned approaches to the problem of rekindling desire and motivation for the study of ELOTE is to be found at the UKOU. This institution, established in 1969, waited until 1991 to open a centre for languages. But once the language course designers had been appointed, they were able to build upon two decades of technology-based distance-teaching in other disciplines at the UKOU, and to specify their own language-specific refinements to the software teams working closely with

them. I will then draw a number of lessons learnt from the experience, for teaching and for research.

The situation of 'foreign language' learning in continental Western European countries

When we look at the take-up of ELOTE in Europe, a mixed picture emerges. On the one hand there are some stark indicators of trouble for the sector. For example, according to [Graddol](#) (1998) in the [Global English Newsletter](#), within the institutions of the European Union and between them and the rest of the world, 70% of all communications are in English. Of all European scientific theses, 70% are published in English. [Graddol](#) comments: "English certainly seems to be establishing itself as the *de facto* 'language of Europe'. [The third issue of the Newsletter] reported that English has been adopted in Swedish boardrooms and this trend is echoed elsewhere: the official language of Louis Vuitton, owned by the French conglomerate LVMH, is English: Merloni SpA in Italy has declared English the company language, while banks in Switzerland use English at senior level."

If we now look at reciprocity of language interest, [Marshall](#) (2001) gives an example showing that some 13,000 German students were studying in the UK in 2001, but only 2,600 British students were studying in Germany. On the other hand, there are signs that European linguistic policies are active in encouraging the study of ELOTE. For example, the [European Council](#), a body which advises the Education Committee of the European Parliament, recognised at its 2000 conference in Lisbon that in the Europe of the future there should be emphasis on 'international skills' and , crucially, EU institutions and EU member state governments should pay special attention to language and other international skills when making appointments. Also, the ministers of education in non-anglophone EU countries agreed to a specific programme: all students at the end of their secondary schooling should leave school with two foreign languages in addition to their own, one of which should be English. What, then, is the response of the UK to the interest in linguistic exchange manifested in the rest of Western Europe?

The situation of 'foreign language' learning in the UK

UK foreign language skills are the lowest in Europe. According to [Eurostat](#), the statistical office of the [European Commission](#), fewer than one in five adults say that they have any foreign language ability whatsoever. Only 10% of end-of-compulsory schooling passes are in language, and only 4% of university entrants have language qualifications. To an extent there is a mystery there, because statistics from the [UK Higher Education Statistics Agency](#) show that the employability of those who leave schools and university with language skills is very high, better, for example, than for computing, physical sciences, psychology or business studies. Language graduates earn on average 8% more than other graduates over a lifetime.

If we are to believe the UK's [Official Graduate Careers website](#), this may not be so surprising, in a period of nearly full employment, such as the UK has experienced in the recent past. But whatever the explanation, numbers are decreasing sharply for two hitherto favoured languages: based on [Marshall's](#) data, French and

German. Table 1 shows the extent of the problem, and the very different situation of Spanish, for children reaching the penultimate year of compulsory schooling:

| UK secondary schools from 2000-2001 to | 2001-2 (pupil numbers) |
|--|------------------------|
| Decline in French | (- 6%) |
| Decline in German | (- 5.6%) |
| Rise in Spanish | (+ 6.9%) |

Table 1: Evolution of take-up of the three main ELOTE in UK secondary schools 01-02

What is the effect on UK higher education?

In the UK Higher Education sector, the knock-on effects of this are now being felt very keenly, as the impact of two end-of-twentieth-century trends: the democratisation of the whole sector and the subsequent changes in national student finance arrangements. The first factor is the massive expansion of the whole higher education sector since the seventies, which is continuing apace. For example 19% of 18-year olds were accessing Higher Education then, compared to 33% now, with declared government targets of 50% in the next ten years. Secondly, the efficiency savings imposed by the UK government on the whole system for a decade took a new dimension in 1990 with the phasing out of universal student grants, and their replacement with student loans, rapidly leading to high levels of student debt and explaining the unpopularity of long courses. One of the first victims was the traditional 'Modern Foreign Language' degree, with its intercalated year 'abroad', i.e. time spent in one of the countries of continental Western Europe, at the student's own expense, and its total of four years in Undergraduate education, a costly process for students, parents and universities alike. Together, these factors have ensured that an ailing ELOTE sector is now very seriously ill indeed. According to an article published on the front page of the national UK broadsheet *The Independent* on 14th December 2002, a snapshot survey of 30 UK universities revealed that "7 out of 10 had either closed or slimmed their language departments last year". The article goes on to point out that "the latest figures by UCAS, the UK university admissions service, show the number of students taking German this autumn fell by 13.6%, French by 1.3% and other European languages by 12.5%."

The fragmented nature of UK language provision

There is a very fragmented situation in England and Northern Ireland, whereby language departments have concentrated on traditional degrees and applied language degrees, while language centres have been created for students of other disciplines. Then the Institution-Wide-Language Programme was created, riding across this already bitty landscape, and offering language tasters to all the students in a number of universities. To add to the confusion, provision for English-as-a-foreign-language has (or sometimes has not) been separate from ELOTE provision. The result is messy.

In a briefing note prepared for the [Higher Education Funding Council](#) in 2000, [Mike Kelly](#), the Director of the national [Subject Centre for Language, Linguistics and Area Studies](#) (about which more later) says that

growing numbers of students are studying degrees in which a language is a minor component, or enrol for courses in languages for specific purposes (e.g. German for engineers or mathematicians, French for lawyers or designers). The UK Higher Education Statistics Agency figures show that 124,000 students are taking a language module of some kind. Over half of these are therefore studying for a degree in disciplines where a language is not a named subject. These figures do not include the many University-wide schemes offering additional language learning on a non credit-bearing basis.

These tensions and contradictions have been extensively reported in the [Teaching Quality Assessment](#) exercise (TQA) for England and Northern Ireland, carried out in 1995/1996 in university language departments. One of the outcomes of TQA was a set of recommendations to improve the five areas identified as weaknesses for the higher education language sector, namely independent learning, new technologies, cultural awareness, assessment and teacher training.

A pressure group response: the [Nuffield Languages Inquiry](#)

In 1998, in response to approaches by language professionals and employers, the Nuffield Foundation set up a national inquiry with the aim of providing an independent view of the UK's future needs for capability in languages and the nation's readiness to address them. The study took place between 1998 and 2000. Its report made 14 main recommendations, summarised in Table 2:

| |
|---|
| Develop a national strategy |
| Raise the profile of languages in the UK |
| Set up Business-Education partnerships |
| Give primary school children a language basis |
| Invest in an early start |
| Raise the quality in secondary schools |
| Ensure wider participation beyond school |
| Promote languages for 16-19 |
| Develop a strategy for higher education |
| Develop huge potential of lifelong learning |
| Intensify recruitment drive |
| Exploit new technologies to the full |
| Ensure policies well informed |
| Establish national standards framework |

Table 2: The recommendations of the Nuffield Inquiry

The Inquiry had pointed out that 9 out of 10 UK children stopped learning languages at the age of 16, that they were without any motivation to pursue these disciplines. This was also linked to the lack of properly qualified language teachers in the UK. It was therefore thought that language education should be offered to those who really wanted it, as part of a special career path. As a result, 126 'specialist colleges' were created. These are schools for age 16-17, preparing pupils for A levels (Higher School Certificate). They have an emphasis on a particular discipline area, for example Arts, or in our case, Languages. The Specialist Colleges were welcomed by the profession,

but they represent only 3% of all secondary schools in UK, and there is no belief that they can cater for more than 10 % of pupils overall. Nor does this strategy address the teacher shortage.

Fighting back with web-based tools

At the same time, in an effort to facilitate consensus-building among Higher Education professionals and to facilitate pooling of ideas and resource, the purely web-based [Subject Centre for Language, Linguistics and Area Studies](#) was created. The idea was to provide a strong web presence, and the resource to organise national events for language professionals in higher education. The [Subject Centre's](#) website is non-password protected, it publishes studies, reports, newsletters, shared resources, workshops, conferences etc. Because it has dedicated funding, it employs a (small) team to keep the site updated on a weekly basis, and it has full search facilities, making it a very useful tool indeed for teachers and researchers in languages. The [Subject Centre](#) was given special government funding for five major strands, in answer to the five weakness areas.

It can be seen from the conclusions both of the [Nuffield Inquiry](#) and of the [TQA](#) that the profession's hopes were pinned on independent learning, lifelong learning and teacher training. Technology was expected to play a strong part in promoting those areas of activity. With the creation of the [Subject Centre](#) and the choice of a predominantly web-based home for it, it is clear that there was also a reliance on technology to network and disseminate. In the next section, I will ask how effective this national strategy has been, and I will use a case study, that of the UKOU, to illustrate the gaps between hopes and reality in the management of an educational crisis such as the decline in ELOTE in this part of Europe in the last two decades of the 20th century.

Distance-teaching methodologies: their role in helping with subject decline

In a keynote speech to Queensland Open Learning Network 'Open Learning Your Future Depends on IT' [Bates](#) (1996) said: "While the establishment of the [UK] Open University in 1969 initially made little impact on established universities, this time technological change is striking at the very heart of conventional schools, colleges and universities. Distance education in particular is no longer a dirty word, but something we all do now in public". So although distance does not equate with technology, nonetheless for languages technology is now a crucial tool for distance delivery. So some of the lessons that the UKOU has learnt over its two decades of experience of using technology for teaching may be of interest to those who are now 'doing it in public'.

ICT hailed as part of the solution

To say that language demand is in decline means that language learner populations do not have the critical mass that institutions find they need to make the teaching economically viable. But because ICT-based courses can function independently of geographical or local organisational barriers, the problem of patchy local demand for

ELOTE, aggravated by closure of classes in schools and colleges, could be considerably reduced by connecting these dispersed learners through virtual environments that render location irrelevant. Within a school or college, the language-learning could be delegated to one institution, who would teach the learners at that school (or at a network of schools) by remote means. The deficit in contact hours can be complemented by self-study using ICT tools. However, as Kelly points out "the development of **appropriate** dedicated computer-based learning materials and activities is not keeping pace". Nor, I would add, is the development of appropriate tutorial strategies, staff development, institutional roll-out plans, or cross-institution partnership models. I now want to look at the use of ICT at a large-scale distance-teaching university with experience of complex infrastructures, the UKOU.

Since 1971, when the first students enrolled, the University has had two million students and turned out 260 000 graduates. Today its student population is approximately 200 000 a year and represents 23% of all part-time higher education students in the UK. Undergraduate study at the UKOU does not require entrance qualifications. More than two third of students successfully complete their course. Like all other UK universities, the UKOU is subjected to external assessment of its teaching and research standards. Means of study include books, audio CDs, videocassettes and CD-ROMs. Communication between students and tutors or peers is via face-to-face tutorials, workshops and Summer Residential Schools, and computer-based teleconferencing. Two conferencing tools are officially supported by the University (which means that access to them comes automatically with registration on a course, and helpdesk assistance is freely available). These tools are an asynchronous text-based conferencing medium, FirstClass, and a synchronous tool based on voice, graphics and text over the Internet, called [Lyceum](#). As can be seen from [Levy](#) (2000) much of the research literature available to date focuses on asynchronous text-based conferencing, and the learning benefits and deficits associated with this medium are increasingly well-known. I will therefore concentrate on [Lyceum](#), on the double assumption that it is not so well-known, yet potentially very powerful as a way of delivering oral interactive skills to language learners.

Internet-based real-time audio-graphic conferencing systems, which allow for synchronous voice communication over the Internet, have been available since the 1990s. [Lyceum](#) is an example of this technology. It was developed within the UKOU, and is being interactively developed to take into account the experience of its users, which include Business Studies, Law, Educational Management and Languages. Piloted since 1998, moved into the core activity of the Languages department of the University in 2001, where it was used to support the teachingⁱ of an intermediate course in German with a population of almost 300 students, the Lyceum system is now rolled out to students of Beginners' French, Spanish and German. Although it is difficult to estimate numbers, our best guess is that in 2003-4 between 500 and 1000 will choose to have their tutorial support via this tool (and about 1500 to 3000 opting for the traditional, face-to-face version of the support).

Lyceum is based on a 'rooms' metaphor, and it includes a range of tools, illustrated in [Figure 1](#).

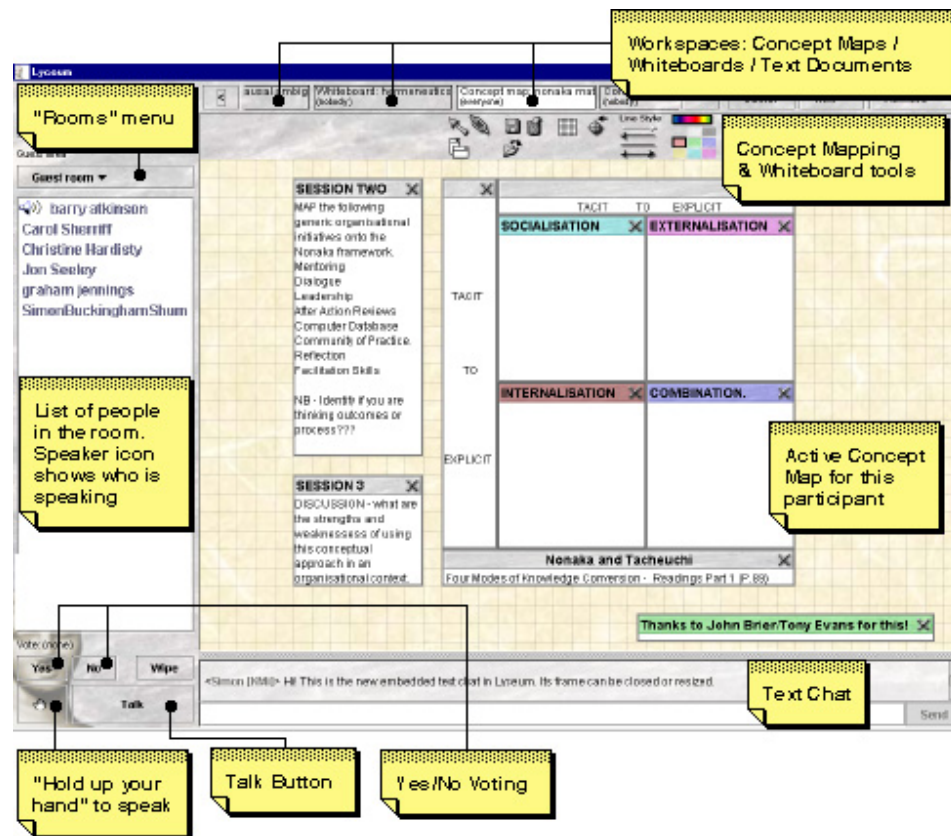


Figure 1: The facilities offered by the Lyceum conferencing system

In the example above, an audio column is shown on the left of the screen, with 6 participants listed as 'logged on'. (A [Lyceum](#) session can accommodate up to 12 participants). When someone is talking, a loud-speaker icon appears opposite their name in the list, clearly identifying them to the group (see for example the first name in the list in the figure). Clicking the Talk Button at the bottom of the column will bring up a small 'hand' icon alongside the name of the person(s) wishing to speak. The tutor is thus helped in his/her task of giving the floor to the participants. A concept map (useful for making notes or brainstorming) is on the right, and a space for text chat makes up the bottom right hand side of the screen. A whiteboard facility (for writing and drawing and for importing and manipulating web images), and a document module (for writing, discussing and editing longer texts) are also available. [Lyceum](#) has a facility to save concept maps and whiteboards and it offers the possibility to record audio and save text chat. Learners can use [Lyceum](#) to communicate orally and in writing, and they can share images and text and work on them collaboratively. For group or pair work, Lyceum offers the possibility of creating 'rooms' (i.e. sub-groups) within a conference, each with the full audio-graphic capacity detailed above. There is no limit as to the number of these temporary rooms, which are accessible to all participants in a conference. Students also have their own personal rooms which they can make accessible to others if they wish to do so. A final advantage of the system is that students have 7/12 access, i.e. they can – and some do – meet and work together synchronously any time they choose, with or without their tutor.

To lower-proficiency language learners and their tutors, [Lyceum](#)'s whiteboard and image-grabbing facilities offer the possibility of structuring a conversation around

a collaborative task, for example the one illustrated in [Figure 2](#), where students have to plot elements of a farm on the drawing (saved from a previous exercise) as a result of negotiations between competing pairs to design the best organic farm they can.

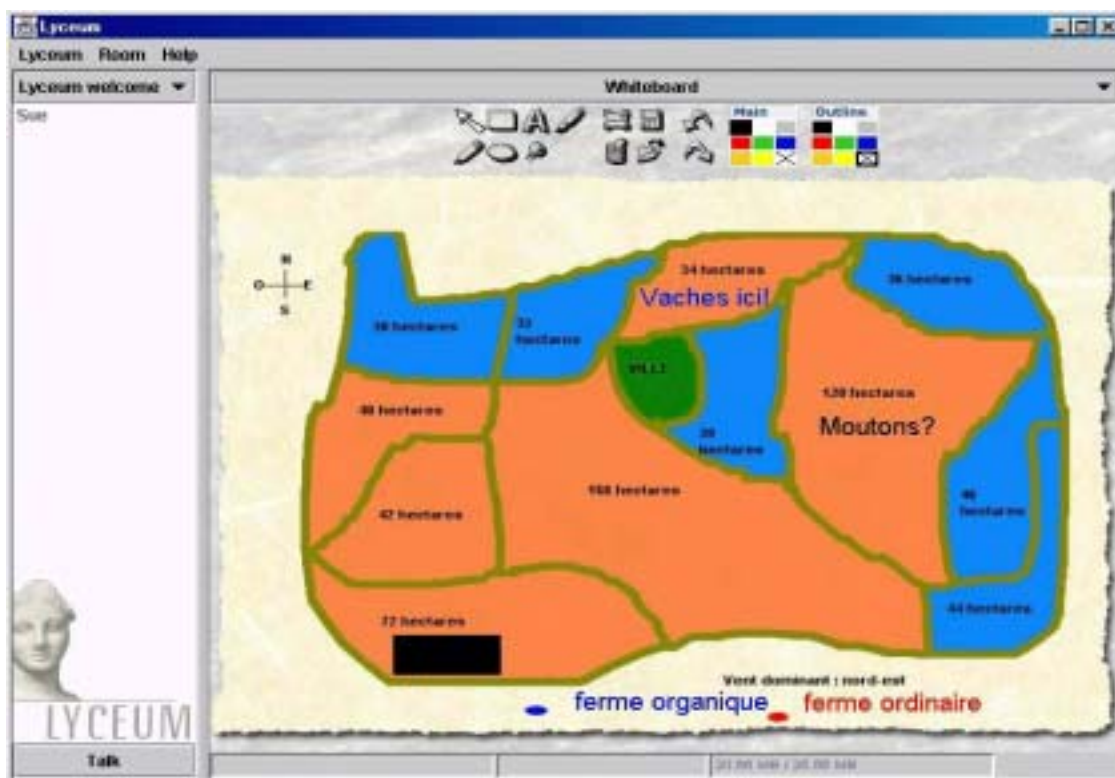


Figure 2: Application of the whiteboard to a collaborative task

Because of its visual input the whiteboard works well with tasks designed for lower level proficiency. The concept map works better with higher levels of proficiency (for example to carry out grammatical or lexical form-focused work).

The implications of the unlimited number of 'rooms' are that flexibility is total for the language teacher: s/he may get learners to work in pairs, trios, sets of six or eight, back into plenaries, etc., at the click of a mouse. Text chats can be used to support warm-up tasks, or debriefing tasks after the main session. Oral debates and role-plays work better if they have been preceded by structured use of [Lyceum](#) (for example listen to and discuss the task instructions in plenary; prepare arguments in trios; bring together two or three of these groups for the actual debate; back to plenary for the wrap-up session).

Lessons from the experience

It would be easy to focus on the positive feedback that has been heaped by students on the university's facilitation of their access to conferencing tools in general, and on [Lyceum](#) in particular, which is perceived as one of the few means by which these remote learners can feel part of a learning community. But in the rest of this section I want to look at what still needs to be done before we can claim that such tools will reinvigorate language learning.

The UKOU's experience over the last two decades shows that there are many lessons to be learned before we can say with confidence that we are using the tool

optimally. The pedagogical lessons to be learnt centre on task design, learner support, the desirability of collaborative learning, and intercultural issues. Institutionally, we have learnt lessons about the ergonomics of conference-design, about systems integration, about the integration of assessment, about learner expectations and last but certainly not least, about workloads for course designers, tutors and learners. I shall devote the next two sections to each of these aspects.

Task design

While feedback from students tells us that online audio-conferencing used for collaborative tasks enhances their learning experience and creates a social world, the disadvantage is that the group depends on individuals' availability for the completion of time-constrained tasks. Designers need to build fallback devices into the course pacing to save it from being affected by this. Overall, collaborative tasks are seen by students as involving a loss of time flexibility. Students in self-study mode prefer totally flexible arrangements. For this reason at the UKOU tutorials are not compulsory. But if an online activity is linked to assessment, then students must 'attend' it. So there is a particular problem with the formal assessment of synchronous activity.

Intercultural lessons

It is easy for participants to log on from the target country or countries, and to be eagerly welcomed into an online language-learning group, as students view the presence of native speakers as indubitably beneficial and group dynamics can be positively influenced by the fact that someone lives in the target culture. Yet a native-speaker teacher with little online facilitating experience can turn out to be a threat to the learning process, whilst a well-trained and experienced non-native speaker facilitator can be crucial to the bonding and survival of a group.

On courses that connect together students from different educational cultures, as [Esch & Zähler](#) (1999) point out, the facilitators need to ask themselves whether forums, emails and other online facilities are conceptualised as learning tools in the different cultures. Is challenging others a valued strategy? Are some teaching cultures more directive than others and will students' expectations be shaped by their prior experience of schooling?

Institutional support

Robust institutional support is crucial. The UKOU is committed to having all its 200 000 students a year on line by 2004, and to support their access to and use of these tools. To minimise the risk of systems overload, the UKOU has found that the institutional strategy should have five strands:

- predict the volume of demand two years ahead
- uniformise and streamline platforms, for economies of scale (this refers as much to the choice between Macs and PCs as to the appearance and structuring of students' e-desktops across the whole institution)
- make sure that your course designers and facilitators are familiar with alternative platforms
- automatise as much of the technical induction and support as possible
- provide free phone helplines
- integrate assessment into the electronic offer

The ergonomics of conferences must not be too complicated or involve too many 'rooms'. Systems integration is valued: students prefer their log-on screen to be a one-stop shop offering course calendar, course guide, email, discussion forum, 'chat' area, other resources and links. Registration and assessment handling should also be integrated.

There is a poor retention rate in 'standalone' ICT-based projects (typically up to 90% loss). Research at the UKOU has found that online tutorial interaction offered solely as a standalone supplementary has not fully justified the time and effort spent setting it up and managing it. So integrating assessment into tasks, and allowing for electronic handling as well as marking of assignments is the key to sustained use of conferencing tools. The main findings for language assessment at the UKOU have been that marking of assignments can be made dependent on online participation, and that the collaborative oral element of language learning can be successfully assessed online.

Student expectations

Students bring expectations about conference availability (or indeed program availability) from their previous conferencing experience. They will suggest the addition of favourite software that the course designers have not thought to include. Indeed students will quite simply upload their preferred software into the conference, and invite their peers to use it. Course designers need to be ready for all these eventualities. Mixing students with different levels of ICT ability can lead to dissatisfaction but when it happens within a group that has been supported in developing social links, it may be seen by students as a great opportunity to share technological expertise, in the target language. We have found that guiding students to expect to learn from such encounters is a factor in the quality of their learning.

Workload issues

The UKOU has calculated that the workload is greater by 30% to 59% for students as well as staff when teaching takes place online. This is because of technical breakdowns, slow connections, time spent printing (54% of messages read apparently end up on the printer and are read in hard copy) and last but not least because all need to learn and manage the tools.

A further consequence of the use of these tools is that they allow students to place additional demands on tutors (through ease and speed of contact). The tutor's workload increases because of the new role attributed to him/her. In face-to-face teaching, the tutor has 3 functions: to ensure socialisation among the group, to facilitate access to knowledge and skill development, and to administer the formal programme of learning. When the tutoring goes online, the balance tilts much more towards the first. The second function requires new skills on the part of the tutor (hypertext and Internet literacy). For the third function, he/she will need time to learn and sustain strategies ensuring that the programme can still be delivered even if the technology fails.

Conclusions and implications for research

The experience accumulated by different discipline areas at the UKOU in distance-teaching and learning and in the use of ICT has been invaluable in allowing us to deliver interactive oral tuition under the best conditions that can be obtained in the current state of our knowledge of the potential of these media. However, much remains to be learnt. Among the main areas for further research are: how learners really use the tools (as opposed to how we predict that they will use them), the benefits and constraints of collaborative learning (do they cancel each other out?), design of task and fitness for purpose in triggering interaction, intercultural issues, e-literacy among teachers and learners, assessment of online contributions, online facilitator training and workload management for all. In the meantime, online conferencing allied to traditional self-study is being delivered by the UKOU to a large body of dispersed learners of ELOTE, who would otherwise find that their local college had simply given up teaching languages.

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POST-SCRIPT

Shortly after this article was completed, the UK government published its "National Languages Strategy for England". Instead of engaging with it, the "Strategy" seems to have accepted that the fragmented nature of the language situation described in this article will endure. In fact it aggravates it by allowing for an entitlement to learning a language for every primary school child, proposing to discontinue compulsory language education after the age of 14, whilst continuing to give no support or direction to language programmes in the university sector. In spite of its repeated call for a boost to the numbers of UK ELOTE teachers, it appears to have given no attention to the fact that it is universities that turn out language teachers. Of ICT, the "Strategy" claims to want to maximise its potential, but ICT is seen mainly as a pathway to the delivery of language teaching in contexts of local staff shortage, and as a solution to the professional development (initial or inset) of teachers who will have to teach language lessons in primary schools. ICT is also presented as providing the answer to disaffection by boys, and "virtual language communities" are envisaged (but not defined or fleshed out). Few, if any, of the concerns addressed in this article feature in the "Strategy". The full document is may be consulted in pdf form at <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/languagesstrategy/>
<http://www.dfes.gov.uk/languagesstrategy/>

¹ At the UKOU, the teaching is done through the materials that students receive in book, audio-visual or software form. Attendance at summer school is compulsory for

some courses. Tutorials are non-compulsory, but provide additional 'support' for the teaching of all subject areas. Students of languages are encouraged to make as much use of this extra support as a way of developing the interactive speaking skill. The facility is offered to them either as face-to-face local classes, or online.