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"It's a unique role!" Perspectives on tutor attributes and expertise in distance language teaching

Monica Shelley, Cynthia White, Uwe Baumann et Linda Murphy

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Résumé de l'article

This article outlines the background to, and progress on, a project based on work carried out at the Open University UK (OUUK). The aim of the project is to articulate the attributes and expertise required by tutors of languages in distance education. A review of the literature on the roles and competencies required for tutors operating at a distance indicates that the specific context of language teaching has received relatively little attention from researchers in the field. There has, however, been considerable interest in the skills and attributes necessary for face-to-face language teaching in the classroom, which is outlined here. Issues of definition and research perspective are discussed, as well as the advantages and disadvantages of various research approaches. The different stages and outcomes of the collaborative project are described in detail, demonstrating how the unfolding research design allowed opportunities for consultation, reflection, and responsive changes. The next stages of consultation are outlined, together with implications for the on-going professional development of tutors.

'It's a unique role!' Perspectives on tutor attributes and expertise in distance language teaching

Monica Shelley
The Open University, UK

Cynthia White
Massey University, New Zealand

Uwe Baumann
The Open University, UK

Linda Murphy
The Open University, UK

Abstract

This article outlines the background to, and progress on, a project based on work carried out at the Open University UK (OUUK). The aim of the project is to articulate the attributes and expertise required by tutors of languages in distance education. A review of the literature on the roles and competencies required for tutors operating at a distance indicates that the specific context of language teaching has received relatively little attention from researchers in the field. There has, however, been considerable interest in the skills and attributes necessary for face-to-face language teaching in the classroom, which is outlined here. Issues of definition and research perspective are discussed, as well as the advantages and disadvantages of various research approaches. The different stages and outcomes of the collaborative project are described in detail, demonstrating how the unfolding research design allowed opportunities for consultation, reflection, and responsive changes. The next stages of consultation are outlined, together with implications for the on-going professional development of tutors.

Keywords: Distance language teaching; tutor attributes; tutor expertise

Background

Tutors in Distance Education: The research literature

Rapidly evolving developments in e-learning, both within and beyond open and distance learning (ODL), have raised questions about the roles required of tutors, about the competencies which underpin those roles, and proposed professional development opportunities (Barker, 2002; Bennett and Marsh, 2002; Duggleby, 2000; Thorpe, 2002).The contribution that tutors make to the success of both online and distance learning opportunities centres on the personal link they establish between student and institution via a range of interactions offering guidance,

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assessment, support, and motivation (Berge, 1995; Fung and Carr, 1999; Lentell, 2003; McPherson and Nunes, 2004; Palloff and Pratt, 1999; J. Tait, 2004). Despite the perceived importance of the tutor role, relatively little research has been undertaken which relates to supporting students at a distance, compared to the substantial literature relating to the production of learning materials and resources (A. Tait, 2000; Tait and Mills, 2003). A number of theorists and commentators have also lamented the paucity of attention given to tutoring at a distance. Lentell and O'Rourke (2004), for instance, argue that tutoring as a professional activity has been carried out largely unseen and unanalysed, certainly in comparison with the prevailing focus on course hardware and software, and argue that it is the less visible element of ODL. Elsewhere Lentell suggests that tutors may be 'unheard' (Lentell, 1994) or 'undervalued' (Lentell, 2003).

As the development of distance courses is frequently separated from the delivery of learning opportunities, tutors are often employed on part-time, temporary contracts which may have long-term effects on their professional status and standing. The outsourcing of tutoring to casual staff, who may not have had any input into course design could, arguably, impact on the tutors' sense of professional identity and agency. This aspect has been highlighted in the case of the OUUK by J. Tait (2004). Here, course materials are produced by full-time academics, and certain aspects of the student support system are organised by full-time regional academics, known as staff tutors – but it is the large pool of part-time tutoring staff who deliver the supporting instruction. J. Tait (2002) argues that undervaluing tutors makes it difficult to develop effective channels of communication between the tutor's experience of teaching and the design of courses. There is an emerging consensus that the role of the tutor as the interface between learners and institution is gaining in importance:

> . . . [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).

Furthermore, institutional research at the OUUK has demonstrated that students at the University rate the continuous assessment and its marking by tutors as 'very helpful' (J. Tait, 2004, p. 100).

Face-to-Face Teachers of Languages

Within the published literature there is a substantial body of work dealing with the skills and expertise required by face-to-face teachers of languages, for example Brosch, 1996; Grenfell, Kelly and Jones, 2003; Hammadou and Bernhardt, 1987; 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). There is, however, little research which focuses directly onto the role of the distance language tutor. In a comprehensive survey of published research on the distance teaching of languages (White, 2006) the author identifies work carried out on teaching roles in relation to online language teaching; feedback from tutors has also been investigated (Ros i Sole and Truman, 2005). Overall, however, this is an area which has hitherto received relatively little attention. Moreover, the emergence of a host of new ways of organising language learning over the past two decades (distributed learning, blended learning, hybrid learning, online learning) has not been met with a similar development of enquiry into what is actually required to carry out teaching roles in such contexts.

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Tutors in Distance Education: The OUUK experience

Over the thirty five years of its existence, the OUUK has developed a substantial support system for tutors or Associate Lecturers (ALs) as they are now called, beginning with a rigorous selection procedure to ensure the employment of suitable candidates. This is backed up with a range of relevant information offered in the early stages, continues through the first two years of employment (since tutors are highly unlikely to have gained expertise in teaching at a distance elsewhere) and is available throughout ALs' career with the OUUK in the form of print materials, regular staff development events, and now the opportunity to gain professional recognition through the Staff and Educational Development Association (SEDA). New ALs are assigned a mentor and are in regular contact with their staff tutor, who organises regular staff development days in each of the thirteen OUUK Regions.

Clear from the start, is that the academic specialism or professional experience of an AL must be complemented by a personal commitment to the education of adults, and an appreciation of the challenges that face adult learners who are studying at a distance. Those ALs who apply to tutor languages are required, as one might expect, to have a degree or equivalent in the relevant language, and to be a native speaker or to have near-native speaker competence. Issues of tutor knowledge and teaching methodology are important here too: they are required to demonstrate a commitment to communicative language-teaching methodology and to have a broad understanding of the societies and cultures of the country in question. While the same qualifications might be required of a classroom teacher, there is little research evidence as to the additional skills needed for the distance teacher of languages; this is the focus of the research reported here. While this enquiry is based on the experience of the OUUK language tutors, the research problem, the research process, and research findings are applicable to other contexts, including dual and mixed mode institutions.

The Research Project: Method and outcomes

Given the lack of research focus and enquiry into teaching roles in distance language education, a collaborative project was established focusing on the attributes, skills, and expertise needed by the distance tutor of languages, the teacher charged with the delivery of distance teaching materials. Tutors – at least in the context of the OUUK – also conduct tutorials, either face-to-face or via a computer-mediated audiographic conferencing system, and provide feedback to continuous assessment. In the exploratory stages of the research described in this paper, it was tutors themselves who gave impetus to the proposed enquiry. They welcomed the opportunity to contribute and acknowledged the value of exploring and documenting the attributes, skills, and expertise required to carry out their jobs. In their view, the exercise was important for increasing awareness of their work, for reference and self-positioning within the field, and as a part of professional development. Specifically the project aims 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

The Research Team

This project has been conceptualised and carried out by a small team of academics from the OUUK and Massey University, New Zealand. It came about as the result of discussions about the role of tutors engaged in the distance teaching of foreign language courses, and how best to

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support them and develop their expertise. It was deemed important that tutors themselves be involved in the identification and definition of that expertise, and that the perspectives of other participants in the development of the materials and students be included. The team includes a staff tutor in languages who has the responsibility for organising the tutors and their work, as well as academics who produce course materials and are responsible for curriculum development.

The Context: Languages at the OUUK

The Department of Languages at the Open University, UK offers courses in French, German, and Spanish from beginners' to graduate level, and a degree in Modern Language Studies; courses can count towards a variety of other named degrees in the OUUK, such as Humanities, European Studies, and International Studies. As of 2006, there were currently around 7000 students registered on the language courses, giving the OUUK a market share of about one-third of the part-time language study market in the UK.

The courses follow the well-established ODL model of supported self-study with specially designed course books as their core, audio and video materials (now gradually being replaced by interactive DVD-ROMs) and other supplementary materials. Students have access to a wide variety of support services provided by the OUUK, including online access to the library, designated course websites, and email conferences. In addition, 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 called *Lyceum,* which has been developed in-house. This instruction is not compulsory, but highly recommended to offer students the opportunity to practise interactive speaking and group activities. Each student is assigned a dedicated personal tutor (Associate Lecturer), who gives written and spoken feedback on regular continuous assessment tasks, and provides support for their students as appropriate.

Issues of Definition and Research Perspectives

In any exploration of the kinds of skills tutors need to carry out their work, two key issues arise relating to terminology and research perspective. The first, terminology, concerns whether the focus is on role, competencies, attributes, expertise, or other terms, and whether matters of definition within the research literature are significant to participants in the research. In developing the research design for the study, the choice of terminology was particularly important since the team was aware that not all tutors would react favourably to the term 'competency': responses during preliminary discussions indicated that for some the term was linked to competency frameworks used as part of formal assessment, and was likely to be misunderstood. In addition, at the time when the study began, the institution was developing a competency framework for all categories of staff, and this project was not part of that. Therefore in the first phase of the study (see below), rather than the generic term competency the words 'knowledge,' 'attitudes,' and 'skills' were used to ask tutors to reflect on those qualities which underpinned their professional roles. As the study progressed, these terms proved rather limiting: they did not represent a comprehensive range of attributes, and may have constrained the responses of the tutors. The terms 'attribute' and 'expertise' were then included in subsequent phases: 'attribute' was taken to mean the characteristic, capacity, or perceived quality of an individual which could include attitude, ability, behaviour, skill, knowledge, or interest. 'Expertise' was taken to mean skill or knowledge in a particular area. 'Attribute and expertise' (A & E) were used together, rather than singly, to cover the semantic field in which the team was interested, given the widespread finding in the wider education domain that in the minds of teachers categories such as knowledge, beliefs, and conceptions of teaching are inextricably intertwined (Verloop, Van Driel and Meijer, 2001).

A second issue concerns research perspectives. To date, 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 most 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, Watland, Pirotte, and Verday, 2004) and of novice teachers (Cadorath, Harris and Encinas, 2002). Each of these approaches can provide useful insights, but the voice of the practising tutor is 'unheard' as suggested by Lentell (1994). The project described below aims to address this absence.

Research Approaches

The study developed around an unfolding research design (White, Murphy, Shelley, and Baumann, 2005) which facilitates the inclusion of different perspectives from a variety of participants working in various roles: as course designers and writers, as regional academics who are responsible for the management of important aspects of student support and who deal directly with tutors, and the tutors themselves, as well, of course, as students. 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 the research process, data-gathering procedures, and participants,

	Data-gathering procedures	Participants
Stage 1	Focus groups, brainstorming techniques	Tutors from one OUUK Region (N=19)
Stage 2	Open-ended questionnaires, and yoked subject technique: individual responses	As for Stage 1 (N=17)
Stage 3	Group interpretation and discussion of revised A & E statements, discussion of tutor maxims and professional development formats	As for Stage 1 (N=20)
Stage 4	Individual responses to revised A & E statements	Tutors in other OU Regions (N=32)
Stage 5	Interviews	Staff tutors and academics with course development roles

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Stage 1 ~ Tutor focus groups

This stage involved tutors from one of the OUUK regions that delivered courses in German, French, and Spanish; some were native speakers of the target language and all 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 consider what they regarded to be the knowledge, skills, and attitudes required to fulfil their roles, using brain-storming techniques, including Brain writing, the Snowball technique, and the Gallery (Open University UK, 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, since one area, ICT for learning at a distance, had drawn very few comments from the tutors and needed to be expanded.

The following eight broad categories were identified:

1. Qualities and affective orientation
2. Pedagogical expertise
3. Subject matter expertise
4. IT skills
5. One-to-one interactive support skills
6. Self-management
7. Group support and management
8. Professional skills and responsibilities

Each of these categories contained further detailed sub-listings.

Stage 2 ~ Tutor responses and the yoked subject technique

Reflection on the taxonomy developed from the preliminary research procedures raised concerns among the research team that these statements appeared largely de-contextualised and codified, providing little indication of the interpretation or significance of each item, or how it functioned in practice. Stage 2 was then developed with the same participants asking them to reflect on the importance of the statements. This was done via open-ended questionnaires to allow for the exploration of tutors' personal understandings of those attributes and expertise which underpin tutoring. An indirect technique was employed to elicit further responses: the yoked subject technique (White, 1994) where tutors were asked to imagine they were talking to a new tutor who wanted to know about the kinds of qualities which are important in distance language tutoring. The yoked subject technique proved to be a particularly rich means of tapping into the way in which tutors reflect on their work, what they identify as key qualities, and how they relate to practice. The importance of qualities such as enthusiasm, approachability, and encouragement was stressed in virtually all the reflective responses of tutors. The data were also analysed with reference to Richards' approach based on teaching maxims (Richards, 1998).

Tutor Maxims

Close analysis of the data suggested 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 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 A & E 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: (1) maxims of empowerment; (2) appropriateness; (3) honesty; and (4) openness (White, Murphy, Shelley, and Baumann, 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 extract below reflects the tutor's personal understanding of what is important to make progress and succeed as a distance language learner:

> *Whatever their level, your students have in them the ability to become excellent and fluent in the language they learn. (Depending on their skill, it may take 3 years or 30), but that's not the issue: make them realise they have this potential. It is important for distance language teaching because language students often do not realise that they have this strength, this potential in themselves. They need to learn that first.*

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:

> *If you are approachable, this means the learner feels s/he can approach you – very important if a sense of isolation and 'stewing in own juice' when there's a problem are to be avoided. If the learner finds you approachable then you probably have many of the other important personal qualities (e.g., encouraging, sympathetic, patient, etc.). In practice students are often quite reluctant to take good advantage of a tutor's approachability (even when they acknowledge it). From time to time contact them and see what you can elicit, suggesting that you are always pleased to get an email from them. Always use a light touch.*

The maxim is clearly based on an understanding of the realities of teacher-learner relationships in distance education.

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 instead as principles that individual tutors attempt to adhere to and to put into

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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.

Stage 3 ~ Group discussion

The next stage of the research project was carried out in the same OUUK Region as before at another Staff Development Day organised for language tutors. The aim in Stage 3 was to give tutors an opportunity to reflect critically on the revised A & E statements as a group and respond to the broad categories and individual items. The sample of tutors overlapped with that of Stage 1, with 20 tutor participants in the group discussions about the statements. The revised version of the A & E 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 A & E statements and the reflective processes used to date in the study, could form part of professional development opportunities, which was the third of the research aims.

a). Group Responses to the A & E Statements:

The A & E statements 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:

> *What I notice with the OU, you have more adult learners, I mean real adults who have a little bit more experience and are a little bit more mature. They have a different learner's style to my daytime higher education students who need a bit more kicking up the backside most of the time.*

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:

> *What I'd focus on, the encouraging . . . because we've got to look at the potential isolation of the OU students . . . sitting there at home and wondering and worrying. So I think what I would really focus on out of all of this, what sets a distance learning tutor apart? It would be the support.*

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All these points could be raised by any distance teacher dealing with students who they may never see. 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:

> *I don't feel as though I'm actually teaching, I'm more monitoring their progress and helping them understand the TMA* [Tutor Marked Assignment] *and structure the TMA, so a lot of things are not really relevant to me, like assisting students in developing pronunciation.*

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:

> *I know, for instance, that I might have one or two students who are really keen on an in-depth explanation of grammar and love it to bits but I also have some who will be completely overwhelmed if I start talking about direct or indirect objects or whatever it is so I've got to make sure that I don't scare the ones who are not very grammar oriented off completely, but do enough so the others are satisfied and don't feel, oh what a waste of time. So it has to be balanced depending on who you are working with at the time.*

b). 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.*

c). 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 training materials to be made generally available to all staff with teaching roles. Including the 'voices' of tutors in the form of verbatim extracts was identified as particularly valuable and seen as providing an important bridge to the lived experiences of tutors.

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Another way to access and develop best practice which was suggested was through a video of tutors and learners at work which could be used as stimulus for further reflection on practice.

Stage 4 ~ A wider consultation

Up until this point, the tutors involved in the research project were located in just one region of the OUUK. Since there was much informal interest in the research project, and to check whether there were any major 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. 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:

> *The students are interested in cultural present-day issues as well as up-to-date language.*

> *Equally important is the knowledge of the German educational system and teaching methods, constantly looking out for new ways of teaching in both systems and the search for fresh understanding of learning styles, especially those which are good fun, should never be underestimated.*

Stage 5 ~ Interviews with colleagues

The most recent stage involves a shift in focus to staff tutor colleagues and academics responsible for developing teaching materials. A series of interview questions have been 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 asks them to comment on the A & E statements. Here just two aspects of preliminary feedback from those interviews are outlined: the issues, challenges, and constraints identified in the language tutor role, and the view of the future. The issues fell into three broad categories. First, the need to manage affective aspects of the role:

- Isolation
- Feeling that tutor ideas are not always valued
- Frustration at not being able to 'keep' all students due to attrition

Time featured as an important constraint:

- Lack of time to give to the kind of support required by certain students
- Lack of time for oral practice students want

Professional and organisational concerns were also expressed:

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- Occasionally, lack of consistency of course team response to things (e.g., standard of marking)
- A job that required full commitment, as tutors are expected to read emails, *First Class*, course e-desktops, etc.
- Inflexibility in course structure – no transferability of TMAs
- 60 point course causing dropout at the boundary between levels 1 and 2

The views of the future included high hopes of a 'virtual community' for tutors via the Internet and course conferences, and the hope that technology can be used to improve and enable more sophisticated, instant feedback

Conclusion

Tutors who work within distance education differ markedly from their classroom counterparts in terms of the roles they assume, the ways in which they interact with students, and the attributes and expertise required of them. All these dimensions have changed and will continue to change in response to shifts in technology, the development of learning environments, and in line with political and institutional factors such as the availability of funding and quality control procedures. 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 the OUUK. 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.

Looking ahead, a further expansion of the project is planned by carrying out a series of interviews with tutors of languages at a distance in other parts of Europe and elsewhere, so as to gain an overview of other contexts, teaching systems, and language groups. These interviews will serve as a basis for case studies, adding another dimension to the research. A similar series of interviews with those who write and produce distance education materials, as well as with students of languages at a distance, is also planned. The extension of this project to a variety of other contexts should demonstrate its value for tutors working in institutions which operate differently from the Open University UK.

In conclusion, this study of the attributes and expertise required by distance language tutors is a promising domain of enquiry, and highlights two additional lines of research which have the potential to expand our understanding of the field. First, there is a 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. Second, 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. Finally, a

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particularly 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.

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