Changing tutor roles in online tutorial support for open distance learning through audio-graphic SCMC

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The use of synchronous computer-mediated communication (SCMC) tools such as audio-graphic conferencing to provide tutorial support in Open Distance Learning (ODL) settings brings with it changes in roles and relationships between tutors and students which need to be researched to gain an insight into the learning experience of those teaching and being taught through the medium. In this paper we will report on a study of language tutors new to audio-graphic conferencing after they spent a year providing online tutorial support for a new beginners' Spanish distance learning language course. We will present how the tutors compare the online and face-to-face environments and how they perceive their roles as online tutors. We conclude that the success of tutorials in an audio-graphic environment depends on the individual tutor: their personality, warmth, and ability to communicate and manage learning become more relevant in the new environment; and that therefore training that goes beyond the technical and pedagogical and includes these aspects is required.

"Teaching in electronic and distance learning environments opens up a whole new range of roles and relationships. It will continue to revolutionise language learning in particular and education in general" (Hauck and Haezewindt, 1999, p. 53). This assertion continues to be as relevant today as it was at the time it was written: Computer-mediated communication (CMC) is "communication that takes place between human beings via the instrumentality of computers" (Herring, 1996, p. 1). This communication can be asynchronous (email exchanges, messageboards) or synchronous. Synchronous CMC (SCMC) was originally limited to text (mostly text chat), but audio conferencing has become commonly available since the mid 1990s through applications such as *NetMeeting*, *Yahoo!*, or *Windows Messenger*. The value of audio conferencing for language learning "is indisputable, providing a means through which learners can practise oral and aural skills even when geographically sep-

arated from their communication partners'' (Levy & Stockwell, 2006, p. 94). Audio conferencing systems now can feature additional tools such as whiteboards, text editors, text chat facilities and web browsers, which can aid communication and interaction. The inclusion of these visual, verbal and written elements into audio-graphic conferencing means that the tools become multi-modal environments which provide opportunities for language learners to interact with a tutor, other learners or with native speakers in the target language. This collaborative learning environment affords relationships between learner/learner or tutor/learner which fit the principles of social constructivism, where learning occurs through interaction: audio-graphic SCMC ''is an ideal medium for collaborative learning through social interaction both with tutors and with peers'' (Hampel & Hauck, 2004, p. 68). In the context of Open and Distance Learning (ODL), audio-graphic conferencing has been praised for its potential for ''removing the distance from distance learning'' (Kötter & Shield, 2000, p. 16) and ODL providers such as Högskolan Dalarna University in Sweden, or the UK Open University, have developed their own audio-graphic conferencing systems. But issues such as coping with the multimodality of the tools, the inclusion of contextual information, the narrowing of the range of symbolic cues, and the increased possibility of ambiguity (Erben, 1999) are still part of the research agenda of mediated interaction through audio-graphic conferencing.

Colpaert (2004) argues that the following criteria of usefulness should be employed when evaluating online interactive language courseware: usability, usage, user satisfaction and criteria for optimizing didactic efficiency. The adoption of audio-graphic conferencing brings with it changes in roles and relationships for tutors and students alike, and these have an effect on usage, user satisfaction, and the learning process (didactic efficiency). Therefore these need to be researched to gain an insight into the learning experience of those teaching and being taught through the medium. Tutors' experiences of online environments are a key element in the Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) research agenda (Warschauer, 1997) as ''the teacher's point of view provides us with another vital perspective (…) and it is a view that must be carefully acknowledged if CALL is to be successful'' (Debski & Levy, 1999, p. 10). The relevance of the tutor's role in audio-graphic learning environments has been acknowledged throughout. Early studies already established the tutor as a key figure in the favourable outcome of their project (Kötter *et al.*, 1999). More recent research, such as the case of a study of online tuition using *OnLive Traveller*, also identified ''the close relationship which is created between the teachers and the students'' (Eklund-Braconi, 2005) as one of the success factors. There is a call for research into the human side of teaching with audio-graphics to identify and share best practice: ''This can be achieved by conducting research into tutor attitudes and teaching styles, tutors' use of the online media and tutors' awareness of the different interaction patterns of online and face-to-face communication – to name but a few of the areas where further investigation would benefit the development of best practice in online tuition'' (Hampel & Stickler, 2005, p. 323). In a study of tutor attitudes towards teaching with the Open University's *Lyceum* audio-graphic software, Rosell-Aguilar (2006a) found that tutors, despite technical problems, had a very positive teaching experience and liked using the tool; however some experienced technical problems and believed that these affect the learning experience.

The audio-graphic tutor: changing roles and skills

"A clearer understanding of the roles and skills required by online tutors will assist those already in the field who wish to improve their practice, and help those new to online teaching" (Cornelius, 2000, p. 1). The role of the tutor in CMC learning environments has been part of the research agenda since the late 90s: "What is the right role for teachers to play in the computer-mediated learning environment? How can teachers make the effective transition from 'sage on the stage' to 'guide on the side' (Tella, 1996, p. 6) that online education entails" (Warschauer, 1997, p. 478). With continuing technological advances, the issue continues to be important: "instructors have an important role in technology enhanced learning environments, especially those that incorporate complex learning paradigms involving constructivist or whole language principles (Stepp-Greany, 2002, p. 174). Goodfellow (1999), in the context of written CMC, noted the increased workload for tutors and the fact that the new context brings new expectations from the tutors. Most of the published research on changing roles for online tutors refers to written asynchronous CMC, and focuses on the moderator and management roles that the medium requires (see McPherson & Nunes, 2004, for a recent review). One of the first findings of the research into audio-graphic environments was that tutors needed to adapt their teaching style to the learning environment to take into account the delay in response time, and other limitations of the medium (Kötter, Rodine, & Shield, 1999). The pressures on tutors, and the roles that they are asked to perform, change and grow with the addition of the CMC factor: the capable 21st century teacher should be "able to move beyond the basic competence (knowledge and skills) towards a flexibility (coping with present twists and turns) and an adaptability (coping with uncertain futures) in a manner that demonstrates potential and professionalism" (Cairns, 1998, p. 49).

The roles of ODL language tutors are very different from those of traditional tutors, but there is "little research that focuses directly onto the role of the distance language tutor" (Shelley *et al.*, 2006, p. 2). When referring here to the face-to-face tutor it is within the ODL setting, where most of the teaching is done through supplied materials and the tutor has other more prominent roles. These include providing support for self-study, offering opportunities to practise what has been learnt at home, as well as other responsibilities also in the domain of traditional teaching: dealing with queries, helping with management of learning, stimulating, boosting confidence, developing learning strategies, encouraging community building. In addition, the learning environment created by tutors in ODL "is a key factor in student retention" (Tait, 2004, p. 97). The audio-graphic environment places ODL tutors in a new context. Context plays a very important role when defining tutor roles and activities (Cornelius, 2000) and "the teacher not only has to attend to the needs of the students in a CALL environment, but his or her choices will also be governed largely by the conditions set by the local context, especially the technological resources, levels of access to computers, technical support, and the institutional, educational and cultural priorities" (Debski & Levy, 1999, p. 10). In the case of ODL language tutors, the ways in which their attributes and expertise change needs to be explored, especially "as they enter new environments, particularly online environments and virtual support networks" (Shelley *et al.*, 2006, p. 12).

Early research into changing tutor roles in asynchronous text conferencing divided tutor roles into pedagogical, social, managerial, and technical (Berge, 1995). Later research defined two tutor types: the "social tutor", who focuses on fluency and allows social

interactions, and the "cognitive tutor", who focuses on accuracy and is subject-knowledge oriented (Lamy & Goodfellow, 1999). In synchronous audio environments, it was found that the tutors "became 'co-ordinators or managers of learning events' rather than tutors in the 'traditional' sense" and also that "the tutor's presence proved to be invaluable both as monitor and facilitator" (Hauck, Hewer, & Shield, 1998, p. 4 of printout). Similarly, Vetter (2004) separated the roles of tutors using an audio-graphic conferencing tool into those of animator, who sets in motion the situations for oral interaction, and facilitator, being available to help students produce the task outcomes. However these classifications limit tutor involvement to the pedagogical side of the many roles that distance tutors carry out. The role of the tutor is much wider. Hauck and Haezewindt (1999) argued that the audio-graphic tutor needs to have:

- confidence when operating the software,
- skills to adapt their teaching style to the audio-graphic environment,
- strategies to encourage students to take more active roles in the learning process.

The last two skills are also referred to by Bennett and Marsh (2002) who state that, beyond the technical level, tutors need to identify the differences between the online and face-to-face contexts and identify the strategies and techniques that can facilitate online learning. It is not only the differences but also the similarities that must be identified: "it is the tutor's responsibility to amalgamate the forum, acknowledging the interest of those who take part freely and directly addressing the quiet ones, as the tutor would normally do in a face-to-face setting" (de los Arcos & Arnedillo Sánchez, 2006, p. 88). Hampel and Hauck (2004) identified five roles which applied to the audio-graphic environment, based on Dias's (1998) "ten teacher-roles": "teacher as confidant", bringing to the students an insight into the rationale of the delivery; "teacher as nervous parent", coping with the new technology; "teacher as trouble shooter", to provide technical advice; "teacher as student", teaming with the students in the learning process; and "teacher as human being", getting to know the students. These roles were described as fluid, and changed throughout the activities. Shield, Hauck & Hewer (2001) state that these roles are mostly social, except for the troubleshooter role and specify that the roles are not only fluid, but that the tutor may be filling more than one at the same time. They separate audio-graphic tutoring styles into three categories: cognitive, social, and administrative, and associate specific roles (some roles to more than one) to each style (Table 1). Their summary of the overarching tutor role is that of a "responsible adult" and "the lynchpin holding the whole enterprise together" (2001, p. 82-83).

Table 1. Online tutor roles according to tutoring style (adapted from Shield, Hauck, & Hewer, 2001, p. 82)

Cognitive	Social	Administrative
• teacher	• human being	• troubleshooter
• content expert	• compere	• convenor
• observer	• nervous parent	• time keeper
• co-learner	• co-learner	• nervous parent

In a later study, Hampel and Stickler (2005) developed a pyramid of skills required for online tutoring, with basic ICT competence at the bottom, and other skills built on top of it: specific technical competence for the software, dealing with constraints and possibilities of the medium, online socialization, facilitating communicative competence, creativity and choice, and finally the tutor's own style at the top.

Tutors have limited affordances within an audio-graphic environment and another factor that has been identified as an issue that affects online tutorials through audio-graphics is multimodality. Audio-graphic tutors (and students) need to cope with the multimodality of the medium: moving the mouse, writing and reading text in the chat section, talking, listening, opening and closing modules, placing images, or moving objects. All these additional roles place considerable demands on the tutor's time (Kötter, 2001; Hampel & Hauck, 2004) and require a good disposition from the tutor: "the best strategy to handle the enmity of the system in such terms is patience in capital letters: for it is also a grateful medium for carrying exceptional quantities of good manners and humour" (de los Arcos & Arnedillo Sánchez, 2006, p. 90).

The study

In this section we first present the context of a study of data collected from 12 tutors after spending a year providing online tutorial support for a new Spanish beginners' ODL course. We will then identify the roles they perceive they are playing as audio-graphic tutors and examine the differences they report between providing tutorial support in the audio-graphic medium and in face-to-face.

Context: course, software, and methodology

The tutors who took part in this study teach *LZX194 Portales*, the Open University beginners' Spanish distance course. To complete the course, students are expected to work independently through books, audio CDs, study guides, and assessment materials in approximately 300 hours of study (which include 21 voluntary hours of contact with a personal tutor). They are given access to a course website where they can find the electronic versions of many of the course materials, such as the main teaching and assessment books on e-book PDF format, or the audio files for the listening component of their assessment, as well as the course calendar, online resources and an asynchronous text CMC conference.

There are two versions of the course. In one, tutorials and the end of course oral assessment are face-to-face, whereas for the other students audio-graphic conferencing is used instead. Attendance to tutorials is voluntary, but the end of course assessment is compulsory. In the first year the course was offered (2003-4), 1694 students signed up for the face-to-face strand and 536 for the online strand.

The audio-graphic conferencing software used at the UK Open University for language courses is an in-house developed programme called *Lyceum*, which allows multiple users to meet online for plenary or small group work and includes synchronous audio conferencing, whiteboards, a text editor, text chat, and a voting facility among other tools. The software is available to all Open University students and many use it beyond tutorial time to meet

socially or form study and revision groups, hence making the most of the affordances of the tool as a medium that allows them to collaborate and take responsibility for their own learning. A taster website is available (http://lyceum-taster.open.ac.uk).

The tutors were all experienced face-to-face teachers but, as this was their first experience of teaching with the audio-graphic environment, they received three training sessions before the start of the course. These focused on technical and pedagogical training, including how to promote peer work, community building, and strategies for inclusion of all students. A fourth training session took place before the end of course assessment, to ensure that tutors were familiar with the format, the marking criteria, how to use the recording facility and send the assessment recordings to the examinations office. As this was the first time a Spanish course offered online tuition at the Open University, the tutors had experience as language teachers but had no experience of teaching using audio-graphic conferencing when they started tutoring. Because of the technical and pedagogical challenges of the medium, online tutors were provided with materials which they had the choice to use, modify, or not use at all (for more details on the course, software and the materials provided see Rosell-Aguilar, 2005). It was up to each tutor to manage their tutorials according to their teaching style and the group of learners in their group, so the learning experience was different in each case.

In all, 26 tutors taught the online strand of the course, with 15-20 students per tutorial group (although many tutors chose to teach more than one tutor group). All 26 online tutors were contacted by email at the end of the course and asked to take part in the study. They were asked two questions:

- What do you think your roles as an online tutor are?
- What do you think the differences between being an online tutor and a face to face tutor are?

and asked to send their comments, however brief. Twelve of them replied and their responses are presented below. Although the sample is relatively small, it represents 46% percent of the total number of tutors teaching the course.

Results & Discussion

The responses gathered are both about differences in the roles that tutors perceive to perform and about differences between face to face and online tutorials. They are presented here in two sections, each divided into parts to reflect the issues discussed above, and illustrated with quotes from the responses received. Together they provide a picture of the online tutorial and the skills required to deal with tutoring in the medium.

a) Differences in perceived roles

The roles the tutors perceive to perform can be mapped within the previously identified cognitive, social, and administrative roles.

The main role, identified in the responses of eleven out of the twelve tutors, is the traditional cognitive role: offering language support to students by providing communicative activities and opportunities for practice. To this, some add monitoring performance and of-

fering feedback of pronunciation and accuracy, and developing materials. They also list some of the general roles associated with being a distance tutor, such as "helping them organize their independent learning," or "providing opportunities for reflection on their own learning, providing tools and resources for increasing autonomy".

Within the social role, the respondents mention mentoring students and more affective roles: "to build up a more personal relationship with students," and "to make them feel at ease during the lesson and to help give them confidence" or "source of emotional support, to ease the anxiety of having to speak Spanish in a medium which in itself can be very cold; the tutor has to create a warm atmosphere, making a bigger effort than in a face to face classroom, precisely for the lack of visual information." Similarly, another tutor feels that he needs to enhance the medium and make up for its deficiencies: "Since there is no personal contact, body language, etc. e.g. in tutorials, the students have to feel that the medium is worth the experience, and that they wouldn't be better off in a face-to-face course. So, in my opinion, one of our roles is that of 'enhancer' of the medium." To one tutor, however, the lack of visuals is not a problem: "I never get to meet physically with my students, nor will I ever see them. This can be discouraging from some students, especially those new to distant education, but I don't find it is a problem." She is a very experienced OU tutor and compares the new medium with the traditional alternative to face to face tutorials before the adoption of the audio-graphic software: "Before *Lyceum* I had telephone tutorials, which I think worked well, but had issues and difficulties of their own. *Lyceum* has meant a tremendous improvement. It is definitely the best alternative to face-to-face tutorials and has some advantages, such as a not having to move from your home to attend them and that students may be more ready to take risks."

The tutors also refer to administrative issues related to teaching the course, such as booking rooms, or sending emails with reminders. Software troubleshooting is grouped within these administrative roles, and it includes training the students to use the software, and providing technical support, for which some state that they need to be confident: "we must be familiar and to a certain extent confident with the use of the technology involved (…) I find that students who join the tutorials do not need too much technical help from me. They pick up any new features during the lessons." One tutor, however, feels she is not competent enough to advise on technical matters, although she does refer them to the helpdesk; and another tutor states that it was time consuming to practise new features of the tools. Two tutors comment on the different management of students in the environment: "in terms of moving from one activity to the other, deciding who goes with whom to work in a breakout room"; "I do feel like a conference moderator," states another.

b) Differences between face to face tutorials and online tutorials:

Comparing online environments has been mostly restricted to studies of asynchronous text-based CMC (see Creanor, 2002 for a comparison between two online courses, or de Freitas & Roberts, 2004 for a comparison of online and face-to-face versions of the same course). Although some consider that "teaching a language over an audio-graphic conferencing system is a completely different experience from teaching a language in a face-to-face environment; any attempt at comparing the two should be disregarded as futile" (de los Arcos & Arnedillo Sánchez, 2006, p. 91), an initiative was undertaken by the

Department of languages at the UK Open University to compare the online and face-to-face tuition modes of the beginners' courses. A study of the possible differences between face-to-face and online students looked at their personal details, attendance to tutorials, perceived benefits of attending tutorials, assessment scores, and dropout rates and found that there were not many differences between online and face-to-face learners except in course results. The responses suggested that despite some technical problems, the software was generally liked and perceived to provide a good, convenient learning environment (Rosell-Aguilar, 2006b).

In the study that this paper reports on, the tutors' responses are quite varied, but some point out that although the differences are "many on the surface," there are not that many differences "on the very basics: offering support and helping each student's learning process."

Five main aspects can be extracted from the responses. Two of these are software limitations: the lack of paralinguistic clues, and the limitations that arise from only being able to have one person speaking at a time when everyone is in the same room. The other three are linked to one another and all have an effect on the tutors' roles and the tutorials: teacher talk, the atmosphere in tutorials, and contact with students.

A) The lack of paralinguistic clues means tutors are unsure of the students' reactions to what they are saying: "in face2face we tend to be very theatrical when using the target language but all that is lost in *Lyceum*," "it can be more difficult to appreciate what really is going on with the students (signs of boredom, puzzlement…)."

B) The limitation of one person being able to speak (technically more than one can, but in practice the utterances can become unintelligible) affects feedback: "[it is] difficult to correct or advise discreetly as [it is] not possible to have a quiet word with one student."

C) Teacher talk is affected by the previous two factors. Because of the lack of visual clues, tutors comment "I spend more time talking / explaining than I would in face to face," and "my "teacher talk" has to be more controlled than it would in a classroom (as I communicate with gestures)." One tutor thinks that "this makes it particularly difficult to make a student feel at ease because we can't see reactions. Even the most competent of students still feel nervous in tutorials." Similarly the speaking limitations mean that "the tutor has to moderate the speakers in a more formal/rigid way. Sometimes I feel that I use too much of their talking time." Another tutor thinks that this means that "students are not so likely to interact independently."

D) The knock-on effect continues to the atmosphere in tutorials and the sense of community among the students. Several tutors say they find it "more difficult to create a relaxed enjoyable atmosphere." One of them qualifies that "because your only tool is your voice, you cannot go into the classroom with a big smile on your face because nobody can see you, so that warmth has to come from the way you deal with the other people in the conference. Also *Lyceum* requires more patience from tutor and students alike, and a lot of understanding and respect for your fellow participants." Another tutor adds: "The online tutor must of course, provide these feelings of belonging and trust

without physical contact." With regards to the sense of community, one tutor misses the degree of intimacy that socialising after the tutorial can bring, but another says: "I actually felt I 'knew' my on-line students better because we 'met' fortnightly and we did not have the long gaps between sessions." This is because face-to-face tutorials are usually longer and they are scheduled every five weeks, whereas most online tutorials take place every two weeks. She clarifies that "before and after the tutorials, the at-mosphere was more relaxed, whereas the tutorial itself was very structured." Students are encouraged to meet online outside tutorials, and one of the tutors thinks this helps develop a learning partnership.

E) Finally, several tutors comment that their online students communicate outside tutorials via e-mail more than their face to face students. They hypothesise that this is because they are used to communicating with them via the computer. One tutor finds this has a beneficial effect: "Sending an email is much easier than making a phone call and I find that [online] students do send lots of emails, and respond with a short answer to emails sent to them. They use them for comments on forthcoming events, travels, and they drop a line on themselves, dog has died, on the weather... Many of them try to do this in Spanish, even at beginners' level; I am sure they wouldn't try in a letter or by phone. So this is the apparent contradiction I have experienced: online tutors may find that they actually have a much more fluid and friendly relationship with their students than face-to-face tutors relying on tutorials or the phone for contact."

In a comment that serves to provide an overall picture, a tutor who is new to ODL says "I have been teaching the same module in face-to-face format and on its online version for about 18 months now, and I can't see online learning as an issue of one medium being bet-ter or worse than the other, online worse than face-to-face or the other way around, but rather as an issue of learning how to get the best of both mediums. In the best of the Open Uni ethos, both students and tutors are together in that process." One very experienced OU language tutor compares the roles using an entertainment metaphor: "I see the face to face tutor like a stand up show person, or musician with a live audience whereas the online tutor is *running the show* from a radio station." This is a suitable metaphor—and it is similar to that of the online teacher being an orchestra conductor (Felix, 2003)—where the face to face tutor is present on the stage, the online tutor is only a voice, but like a radio presenter it is the familiar voice that brings humanity and warmth to the environment, accompa-nies the students in their learning journey, carries the programme and is in charge of the content, focus and pace based on an original plan but always shaped by the contributions of those listeners that become active and take part.

In summary, the tutors agree that different skills are needed and new demands are placed on them, but what seems to arise from the comments is that the differences between the online and face-to-face environments are not substantial: "I do not believe online tutoring to lack in anything, I just think that the tutor needs to adapt to the medium and makes the most of it. And when one does, s/he finds s/he gets to know their students well, can sup-port them effectively and even create a group feeling among 'all'."

Other considerations for the use of audio-graphic conferencing in distance language learning:

One key issue is that even though audio-graphic tutoring may not involve many more or different skills than tutoring face-to-face, and tutors who were inexperienced at using the tool report being able to adapt with relative ease, audio-graphic tuition is conceived as an alternative, and not a replacement, for face-to-face tuition. In the context presented it has replaced telephone tuition: it is immensely more popular in numbers than telephone tuition was, and with the visual modules it can offer better stimuli for group interaction, with the exception of the possibility of technical and sound problems. These, however, should be no more of a deterrent to using audio-graphic SCMC than a crackling line should have put people off using the telephone years ago.

A matter that was referred to above is the multimodality that is inherent to the audio-graphic environment: whilst managing all the different modes and signals (such as hands help up, votes, text chat, and objects, on top of voice), often at the same time, is a characteristic of the environment that online tutors need to get used to or a skill that they need to develop, this was not mentioned in the respondents' replies. One possible explanation is that coping with multimodality is no longer limited to the realm of the computer, but something that is becoming commonplace. Let's consider television as another multimodal tool: 24 hour TV News channels show a newsreader making announcements while statistics, graphics, and images appear on the screen and main headline news scroll as text. Users are asked to contribute by sending in photos, videos, and comments by email or SMS, which scroll or pop up onscreen. Many television viewers use shopping channels, where a demonstration is featured while further details and prices are on the side of the screen, and updates on stock amounts scroll whilst on the corners we usually find the logo of the channel and the telephone number or URL required to make a purchase. Digital television viewers have access to additional content in many channels. On Children's television, programmes like the BBC's *Level up* present a completely multimodal approach to television, where presenters, text, images, and the children's contributions via their webcams form only part of a whole that incorporates a website, email contributions, and the viewers' blogs. Whilst not every user/viewer/learner will like this, multimodality is a part of modern life and therefore its impact on a learning tool may not be as big an issue as had been anticipated, at least for students, who, although involved in the tutorial, are not part of its management. The tutor, however, could potentially be overwhelmed by the amount of actions required whilst online, although in a previous study of tutor impressions of teaching with audio-graphic software, the multimodal aspect of it was only perceived as a benefit of the tool, not a challenge or problem (Rosell-Aguilar, 2006a).

To address the issue of increased workload in the context of written CMC, Thorpe and Twining (2001) proposed separating the roles of the tutor and conference moderator. This is feasible in the written CMC context with one nation-wide moderator who does not have to reply immediately, but in the synchronous audio-graphic context it would be unmanageable or very expensive to staff. One option that might lighten the load for tutors would be to work in tandem. Tutorial groups with low attendance could be merged and the two tutors could have clear roles deciding beforehand who leads each activity, for example. This way while one talks the other could be managing different modules, or typing new words

into the chat, they could separate into different breakout rooms and do more personalised feedback, among other possibilities. This option has been suggested to tutors, but there is no information available on the take up or success of the proposal.

Finally, research into audio-graphic tools has mainly been exclusive to researchers in the few institutions that have access to these tools, as is the case of *Lyceum* at the Open University. Although that research is of interest to the wider research and teaching community, its applicable value has, because of that exclusivity, been quite limited. The Open University intends to phase out *Lyceum* in favour of a new Moodle-based open-content audio-graphic synchronous conferencing tool, expected to be available in 2008. The open content initiative means that the new software (which is expected to provide audio - and video - conferencing as well as other tools) should be available for use by other education providers. With this development, the insight into teaching with such tools becomes more valuable to other language learning professionals and institutions.

Conclusion

In this paper we have presented the data collected about tutor roles in the audio-graphic environment, and the differences between teaching face-to-face and online tutorials.

The roles that the participants report as audio-graphic tutors match those previously identified for tutors of higher level language tutorials. However, due to the fact that the participants taught a beginners' course, some issues reported by previous research—such as preparation work between tutorials, or eliciting higher-level language—did not apply. Instead tutors rose to the challenge of engaging the learners in the limited language they could use, since, for many of the students, this was the first time they had studied or used the foreign language. Tutors do need specific skills to operate the audio-graphic conferencing software, know its strengths and limitations. However there is no need to go beyond "average" computer literacy skills and the available training to achieve this. The tutors did not need to develop their own materials, but developed the sense of what will work with the group and within the environment and therefore made the necessary changes to the proposed lesson plans to fit their particular tutorials. But as this survey was undertaken after the tutors had been teaching the online course for only one year, their skills with the tool and their views may have changed as they gained more experience of using it. Their management skills, including booking rooms, or sending emails with the time of the tutorial, need not be any different from those of a face-to-face tutor, indeed aside from setting procedures and differences in teacher talk they did not find tutoring online differed much from the traditional face-to-face environment.

The tutors' own style appeared at the top of Hampel and Stickler's pyramid of online tutoring skills. Whilst this is true of face-to-face teaching as well, it seems to become even more essential in an online environment. No matter how many tools, affordances, or opportunities for communication the software and environment provide, it is the tutor who will make the experience a failure or success. Eklund-Braconi (2005) came to the conclusion that in an audio-graphic learning environment a success factor is the teacher who has to "fill the gap in the [virtual] space." But the tutor's role goes beyond "filling the gap" to bringing humanity and warmth, having the ability to communicate and manage the envi-

ronment, keeping the momentum and also the focus, much like a radio DJ would. For this reason, tutor training and staff development that go beyond the technical and focus on the social aspects of tutoring are essential in the provision of audio-graphic online tuition.

Acknowledgement

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