


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

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Developing Online Language Teaching: Research-Based Pedagogies and Reflective Practices		
Author:	Regine Hampel and Ursula Stickler (2015)	
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Today's language teacher faces several challenges associated with teaching via a new medium and developing new skills sets. Edited by Regine Hampel and Ursula Stickler, the significance of *Developing Online Language Teaching: Research-Based Pedagogies and Reflective Practices* is the direct way in which it frames this changing reality for language professionals in an increasingly digital world. The editors take into account the various contexts in which teachers will find themselves throughout their careers, and is intended for those currently teaching or interested in teaching online, teacher trainers in search of theoretical models and methodologies to help their trainees, and researchers interested in grounded and action research on online language teaching. Adopting a reflective-inquiry approach, the book encourages teachers to self-assess. To that end, each chapter concludes with a reflective activity, which allows the reader to connect and transfer the content to his or her individual context.

Those leading faculty development initiatives aimed at fostering the technology skills of digital natives, immigrants, and sojourners will find this edited series especially valuable, as widespread access to information and communication technology (ICT) has resulted in the growing importance of digital tools in formal and informal language learning contexts. That said, the book underscores that ICT adoption in formal settings has lagged, in part due to a resistance to the use of technology in the classroom (many equipped classrooms go unused), and a common belief held by many teachers that language learning requires physical interaction. Chapter 2 emphasizes that teacher education must consist of on-going training to help teachers develop their pedagogical awareness of how ICT can enhance language

learning, especially in formal school settings. The chapter consists of survey results aggregated over several years from the Developing Online Teaching Skills (DOTS) project sponsored by the European Center for Modern Languages (see Chapters 10 and 11 for a full discussion and application of DOTS). The themed results include extensive discussion on teachers' attitudes and beliefs towards language teaching and learning, use of technology in the classroom, and ongoing professional development. This chapter offers a strong argument for sustained in-service support and training to overcome teacher resistance towards ICT as well as the need to incorporate technology training into pre-service programs.

While language teachers are bound by a common teaching domain, their contexts and employment status vary widely, perhaps more so than any other teaching profession. To that end, the editors have thoughtfully taken a refreshingly inclusive approach by addressing the continuing professional development (CPD) experiences of part-time and freelance language teachers. Chapter 3 examines constraints in accessing CPD due to limited time and money, a reality faced by many adjunct and freelance professionals in the language teaching field. Even though institutional expectations influenced CPD for some, informal and flexible learning (e.g., discussion with peers + blogs + classroom observations) provided the greatest opportunities for marginalized teachers to continue their professional development. The authors conclude by weaving a connection between teachers' professional identities as well as their teaching contexts (e.g., face-to-face, blended, or online) to their beliefs and attitudes towards ICT.

Moving from the convincing argument for CPD to develop new skills, the central chapters of the book identify the specific skills sets teachers need and the very practical question of how to go about obtaining said skills. Chapters 4 and 5 focus on both those teacher attributes which students feel are central to their success and those abilities identified in an evolving theoretical model of online language teaching. Individuals new to computer assisted language learning (CALL) will find the opening theoretical discussion in Chapter 4 both current and remarkably accessible. Using an established taxonomy, the learner-ranked attributes of successful online and blended teacher qualities almost mirror those of face-to-face teaching, to include: subject matter expertise, pedagogical expertise, and interactive support skills, among others. This follows with extensive discussion of the online language teaching skills pyramid, which has shifted over the past ten years from a focus on technology to an emphasis on learning, creativity, and digital citizenship. In answer to the question of how teachers can acquire new skills, Chapters 6 and 7 are particularly worthwhile as they target free online training and open education resources for self-support, initial training, and ongoing professional development. The links included are ones the reader will want to take the time to explore.

Any book addressing online teacher training would be incomplete without a chapter on communities of practice (CoPs), and *Developing Online Language Teaching: Research-Based Pedagogies and Reflective Practices* delivers. CoPs have evolved as places of learning, where individuals come together to build a shared understanding towards a specific topical domain, in this case, language teaching. In Chapter 8, three examples of current CoPs are presented as case studies: The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) Language Educators Community, Middlebury Interactive Teachers Community, and The Croatian Regional Online Community. The chapter takes the unique approach of discussing key factors of successful CoPs, consisting of: shared characteristics (e.g., a

common domain), design principles (e.g., public and private spaces), a variety of activities, and relevance. This is a valuable chapter for those who host CoPs, include CoPs within their teacher training programs, or who encourage teacher participation in CoPs.

The spectrum of topics and practical orientation of *Developing Online Language Teaching: Research-Based Pedagogies and Reflective Practices* make it accessible to those interested in self-training. This appears as a timely approach given both the explosion of informal online language teaching platforms where casually employed language teachers practice their craft and the reality of pre-service and in-service programs struggling to keep pace with methodological changes stemming from the rapid growth of ICT. That said, the target readership is everyone involved in language teaching, teacher training, and related research. As Hampel and Stickler state, the relevance of the book lies in the fact that “current skills are never enough and the ability to self-train and further develop one’s own skills independently becomes indispensable” (p. 9). Due to the straightforward and self-reflective approach adopted by all of the authors, I highly recommend this book.

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