Defining teachers' readiness for online language teaching: toward a unified framework

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Abstract. As part of a larger effort to support Less Commonly Taught Languages (LCTL) instruction in the United States, the LCTL Partnership at Michigan State University (MSU) and the LCTL Collaborative Partners initiative at the University of Chicago (UC) are supporting online LCTL courses to be offered to students across multiple institutions. As the initiatives were underway, it became clear that LCTL teachers' familiarity with online teaching ranged widely. This is not surprising, especially considering that many LCTL teachers have never participated in any kind of online learning experience – let alone taught online. This paper reports on the first phase of a collaborative project that aims to identify and define key competencies for Online Language Teaching (OLT) and conceptualize a set of OLT readiness can-do statements. In a next phase, this framework will be used to build an assessment that gauges teachers' readiness to teach language courses online and provide these teachers with formative feedback.

Keywords: online teaching readiness, key competencies, assessment, less commonly taught languages.

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1.   Introduction

Online education continues to become more integral to the mission of post-secondary institutions in the United States, as demonstrated by the fact that one in three students is enrolled in at least one online course in a given semester (Seaman, Allen, & Seaman, 2018). Benefits of online education are numerous, including increased access, flexibility, just-in-time access to feedback, and affordability (Li & Irby, 2008).

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in online language education, both from a theoretical and practical perspective. Two of the initiatives currently underway in this area are the LCTL Partnership at MSU and the LCTL Collaborative Partners initiative at UC. While a full description of the projects falls outside the scope of this paper, both initiatives (as part of a larger effort to support LCTL instruction) are supporting online courses to be offered across multiple institutions within the Big Ten Academic Alliance, a consortium of universities in the United States. During our work, we discovered that teachers involved in the project possessed a wide range of familiarity with online pedagogy, probably due to the fact that a number of them did not have much experience with the medium.

2.   Toward a useful framework for OLT skills

Current frameworks for OLT do not successfully address the current landscape of online education and there is no mechanism for translating these theoretical frameworks into practice. Our framework is based upon that of Compton (2009), who performed a review of key publications in computer assisted language learning, online (language) education, and teacher education published between 2000 and 2008. She concluded that there were very limited resources available to prepare language teachers for OLT. Furthermore, she provided a critique of existing skills frameworks for OLT and proposed her own framework breaking down OLT in three major skill domains:

> "The first set, *technological skills*, relate to knowledge and ability to handle hardware and software issues. Next, the *pedagogical skills* refer to knowledge and ability to conduct and facilitate teaching and learning activities. Lastly, the *evaluative skills* refer to the analytical ability to assess the tasks and overall course and make necessary modifications to ensure language learning objectives are met" (Compton, 2009, p. 81).

Each skill domain is further organized into three levels of expertise: novice, proficient, and expert. Compton (2009) includes a range of skills that should get primary focus in language teacher education programs, and acknowledges that other skills can (and, nowadays, should) be added to the framework.

In an effort to better prepare in-service and pre-service language teachers for OLT, the UC Language Center began developing an assessment instrument to evaluate their readiness for teaching in diverse online contexts (Dursun & Swinehart, 2017). The OLT Readiness Assessment is based on Compton's (2009) framework, with the addition of more-recent technological skills. What makes this instrument unique is that it not only asks teachers to self-assess their technological, pedagogical, and evaluation skills, but also measures their ability to put these skills into practice. Following a sequential design, the authors identified the key skills in each of Compton's (2009) skill domains, added relevant skills from reviewing recent literature, synthesized these skills into can-do statements, and wrote assessment tasks measuring knowledge and ability.

As the OLT Readiness Assessment was piloted at MSU, it became clear that the overall framework needed further definition before it could be operationalized. As a result, both partners collaborated to revise and update the framework, integrating aspects that have emerged in the practice of OLT since the development of Compton's (2009) framework, such as familiarity with accessibility guidelines, Instructional Design strategies, media production, and online presence strategies.

3.   The updated framework

We kept the structure of Compton's (2009) framework largely intact. However, to account for teachers who may not be at all familiar with the principles and dynamics of online instruction, we added a base level that we identified as *limited*. We also redefined the four levels of expertise as follows:

- *Limited* teachers have rudimentary knowledge or awareness of the basic principles and dynamics of online instruction. They have limited to no ability and confidence to perform basic OLT tasks. Limited teachers are characterized by a tendency to directly transfer face-to-face practices and pedagogies to the online environment.

- *Novice* teachers have basic competence and can demonstrate a (marginally) acceptable performance. They are building up experience and confidence

in OLT but are best suited at implementing courses designed by more experienced teachers and/or with guidance from more experienced teachers.

- *Proficient* teachers have effective and independent facility with all actions (competencies) required for successful OLT. They have a clear grasp of the affordances and constraints of OLT and can efficiently organize and implement OLT pedagogy.

- *Expert* teachers are highly proficient and have wide and varied experience in OLT. They can flexibly adapt OLT to meet new mandates and purposes, creatively offer novel solutions, and are capable of training less proficient teachers in the effective implementation of OLT.

Each level encompasses a distinct set of OLT competencies. A competency is more than just knowledge and skills; competency "is the ability to successfully meet complex demands in varied contexts through the mobilization of psychosocial resources, including knowledge and skills, motivation, attitudes, emotions, and other social and behavioral components" (Schleicher, 2007, p. 351). In the framework, we identified 11 OLT competency areas to be divided among three domains:

- Technology: (1) learning management system and educational applications, (2) course design, (3) accessibility, (4) learner support, and (5) educational media.

- Pedagogy: (6) presence strategies, (7) online language task design, (8) online assessment strategies, (9) dynamics of online instruction, and (10) online curriculum design principles.

- Evaluation: (11) conducting online task and course evaluations.

Next, the competencies needed to perform in each domain are operationalized in terms of can-do statements, as below:

- *Novice, Technology, Accessibility*: can identify and address 'low-hanging fruit' accessibility issues (e.g. text colors, HTML formatting, etc.).

- *Proficient, Pedagogy, Presence Strategies*: can utilize a variety of effective teaching, social, and cognitive presence strategies in an online course.

The competencies within each level can be developed individually or simultaneously, but they are necessary in order to proceed to the next level of readiness.

4. Conclusion

By conceptualizing an OLT readiness framework, we hope to stimulate discussion about what technological, pedagogical, and evaluation competencies present and future teachers need in order to be successful and effective online language teachers. By linking these competencies to four levels of expertise (limited, novice, proficient, and expert), we cater to the needs of both the teacher who has no real online teaching experiences but who transitions from a face-to-face classroom to a blended or fully online environment, and a more experienced teacher who is already teaching online but wants to improve their OLT skills. By identifying three different domains (technology, pedagogy, and evaluation), clusters of competencies (areas), and specific can-do statements, we hope to have designed a very practical framework that can serve as the basis of an assessment tool providing valid interpretation of teachers' readiness to teach online. In a next step, we will design and provide validation evidence for a performance assessment instrument based on the identified levels and competencies. Ultimately, we hope our framework will inform professional development initiatives and curricula of teacher education programs.

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