

Learning How to Teach Languages Online: Voices from the Field

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Abstract

At this moment, fully online language courses are being taught all around the globe. In addition, blended courses offer an integration of online and live instructional experiences. This study examines who is instructing online language courses and what they point to as additive and advantageous to their online language teaching development. We set out to survey higher education faculty as to how they developed their knowledge and practices. Through an online survey and follow-up synchronous interviews, we asked practicing online language educators about the sources of their expertise. The resulting dataset has much to inform professional development and instructional support generally, as well as broader research and educator communities regarding the ongoing, open-ended, peer-supported, and social nature of this kind of educator learning. As more language educators move their instruction online, the question of how to maximize the pedagogical potential of the new medium can best be addressed by those who have successfully made and embraced this move.

Keywords: Online language teaching, professional development in online teaching, learning to teach online, teaching languages online.

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As we know from studies in adult learning, expertise develops in any number of ways with and without formal, institutional support (Bruner, 1996; Lave & Wenger, 1998; Lindeman, 2015; Mezirow, 1991). Access to formal coursework and workshops designed to train educators to teach online is on the rise as is access to informal mediums, materials, and self-instruction through internet sites and social media. Institutional offerings, self-paced online training modules, conference workshops, MOOCs, and for-credit coursework are widely available to those seeking to develop their knowledge and skills in online teaching. Similarly, the number of self-taught online educators is growing given the array of readily accessible information, materials, and independent learning opportunities freely available on the Internet (Meskill et al., 2020).

Forced migration to online teaching due to the global pandemic has also brought educators to seek instruction in how to teach online (Schrenk et al., 2021). Teaching expertise, whether developed through formal instruction, informal self-initiated instruction or some combination of the two, is typically viewed as a merger of content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, and social knowledge (Freeman, 2009; Johnson, 2009). For language educators, the honing of content expertise can be viewed as sharp listening, reading, and noticing skills when it comes to linguistic phenomena (Meskill & Anthony, 2015). That is, content is comprised of the target language and the worlds of meaning that get expressed through it. A language educator's major responsibility is to render these worlds comprehensible and guide learners to successfully interact in them using their new language. Further, because communication cannot be viewed otherwise, social knowledge comes at the intersection of content and pedagogy as the assignments and activities that language educators design and orchestrate are eminently social in nature. Given such foundations, the goal for online language educators is to be well equipped to make constructive, moment-by-moment pedagogical decisions. In language education, this decision-making is informed by a rapidly expanding knowledge base concerning the social and communicative dimensions of mastering another language (Gee, 2004; Johnson, 2006) along with how these are best instantiated in online venues (e.g., Baumann et al., 2008; Meskill & Anthony, 2015). This study explores how practicing online language educators developed the competencies they deemed necessary to do this work. As such, we pose the following research questions:

1. How do post-secondary online language educators develop initial and subsequent online teaching practices?
2. How do post-secondary language educators make use of peer collaborations, formal instruction and/or modeling in learning to teach online?

Literature Review

Professional development in how to design and teach online courses has been researched from a range of perspectives. In the past decade, opportunities to complete formal instruction in online language pedagogy are increasingly available through educational institutions and via government and commercial agencies. Research examining the efficacy of this instruction remains scant. Empirical research remains limited to examining teacher attitudes towards specific learning experiences and rarely extends to determining the efficacy of professional

development experiences on participants' ability to teach well online (Leary et al, 2020; Nazari & Xodabande, 2020; Shin & Kang, 2018). Forms of formal instruction that make up the current research base in this regard include 1) observation of others teaching online (models and affordances); 2) learning by doing, and 3) peer collaborations.

Models and Affordances

Whyte's 2011 study illustrated the value of participants observing and comparing the online language teaching practices of others. Based on participant feedback, the authors cautioned the need to guide educators while they observed others teach so that they could appropriately identify the match and mismatch of technological affordances with pedagogical practices: "Educators can and do self-train with new technology but cannot identify the affordances of the new tools unless they receive help in identifying effective language learning practices" (Whyte, 2011, p. 291). The ability to recognize the alignments between technological affordances and elements of effective practice was also the subject of a study by Pineda et al. (2016). This study of online language teacher professional development reported that at the close of a professional development sequence, participants were able to put into practice specific online language teaching competencies that involved identifying, orchestrating, and assessing online activities (Pineda et al., 2016). Further, in a study that examined the combined approaches of observation and reflection, a Cambodian project had new and practicing online English educators participating in seven asynchronous online language courses while reflecting on these in their personal blogs. Competencies associated with aligning technological affordances and their appropriate pedagogical uses constituted a predominant feature in participants' reflections (Houterman, 2017). Research in teacher education consistently affirms that educators, especially novice educators, tend to teach the way they were taught (Almarza, 1996; Borg, 2003; Feinman-Nemser & Flodden, 1986). Many language educators, however, lack access to practical examples and models as they have not learned languages online themselves (McNeil, 2016). In their examination of teacher education sequences, Stürmer et al. (2013), for example, found the use of video models of pedagogical/conceptual knowledge in action to be the most additive aspect in terms of nurturing and sustaining professional vision. Additional research provides evidence of professional growth being most strongly manifest when videos of classroom teaching were used as models and reflective springboards for developing and reasoning about pedagogical knowledge (van Es & Sherin, 2002).

A key aspect of online language teaching models is representing how the medium can best be used for social exchanges (Meskill & Anthony, 2015; Meskill & Anthony, 2018). For instance, Cook's study of professional development for online teaching illustrated how situated learning experiences not only allowed the instructor to teach explicit knowledge but also to model online social interactions:

(Through) debate, conflict, and sometimes battle in the course archive, prospective instructors experienced struggles similar to those their own students may exhibit when learning online. Although this experience may not completely prepare them with specific solutions for moderating or resolving students' struggles, it can help them to recognize that such conflicts are intrinsic to writing and learning ...and, therefore, to be expected when students choose to learn online (Cook, 2007, p. 74).

Learning by Doing

In terms of learning through hands-on instruction, Liu and Kleinsasser (2014) described the results of a 10-month cross-tier online professional development sequence integrated into a teacher training program. The program involved Taiwanese preservice and in-service English as foreign language educators interacting with one another playing the roles of educators and their students. The study suggested that such novice-expert partnerships could bring insight and understanding concerning professional growth, practical teaching implementations, and their outcomes. An additional study of formal teacher preparation for online language teaching found success using “authentic project-based learning, preferably embedded within their own context” (Dabner et al., 2012, p. 73). In Adnan’s (2018) examination of a professional development sequence for online language teaching, participants reported that, to enhance their traditional roles, they needed to develop competencies for online learning environments and active practice in real-life applications.

Ernest et al. (2013) reported on an online teacher development project based on “learning by doing” which enabled participants to assume the role of a student. In this way they could directly experience the impact of online teacher discourse and how it shaped (or didn’t shape) learning. Participants gained from first-hand experience with the affordances and pitfalls from a student’s perspective. They pointed to this form of modeling as a particularly contributive element to their learning. Likewise in a study of seasoned English as a Foreign Language educators new to the notion of teaching online, Meskill and Sadykova (2011) found that having these educators observe others teaching their students in an online fishbowl format helped them better conceptualize online venues as places for student-centered, communication-rich language learning. Finally, in a study examining teacher appropriation of modeled online instructional conversations, Meskill and Anthony (2007) found that “readings, discussions, simulated practice, and reflections concerning engagement in instructional conversations can indeed foment awareness of the anatomy of effective online instructional conversations for foreign and second language instruction” (p. 5).

Peer Collaborations

Peer collaborations in the form of profession-focused discussion are widely advocated as a generative form of professional development (Arnold & Ducate, 2006; Barab et al., 2004; Kohnke, 2021; Lantz-Andersson et al., 2018; Meskill et al., 2020; Macià & García, 2016; Vinagre, 2017). In the last decades, social media and social networking have opened up vital channels for peer-to-peer professional development opportunities. Through informal online special interest groups, moderated discussions via professional organization sites, and shared commentary opportunities via social media, new and practicing educators learn about and from one another’s practices. To determine whether and how online language educators made use of such opportunities, Colibaba et al. (2012) surveyed online language educators about their uses of social media to support their teaching. The vast majority of respondents reported using social networks to talk to colleagues and share resources, to learn about work-related seminars, courses, and webinars and to participate in their own network of professional contacts (Colibaba et al., 2012). Use of social networking has been found to support language educator development generally (Albion et al., 2015), especially its vitalizing aspect when participants serve as experienced mentors to new online educators (Liu & Kleinsasser, 2014).

The present inquiry into the professional development strategies used by post-secondary language instructors making the move to online instruction provides a working framework based

on reported experiences. Our findings on the approaches these educators favored in an effort to better understand the online medium's affordances and applications offer insight into the how and what of their processes. These insights and accounts can inform the design of professional development as well as inform practicing online language educators about useful sources and strategies.

Methodology

The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do post-secondary online language educators develop initial and subsequent online teaching practices?
2. How do post-secondary language educators make use of peer collaborations, formal instruction and/or modeling in learning to teach online?

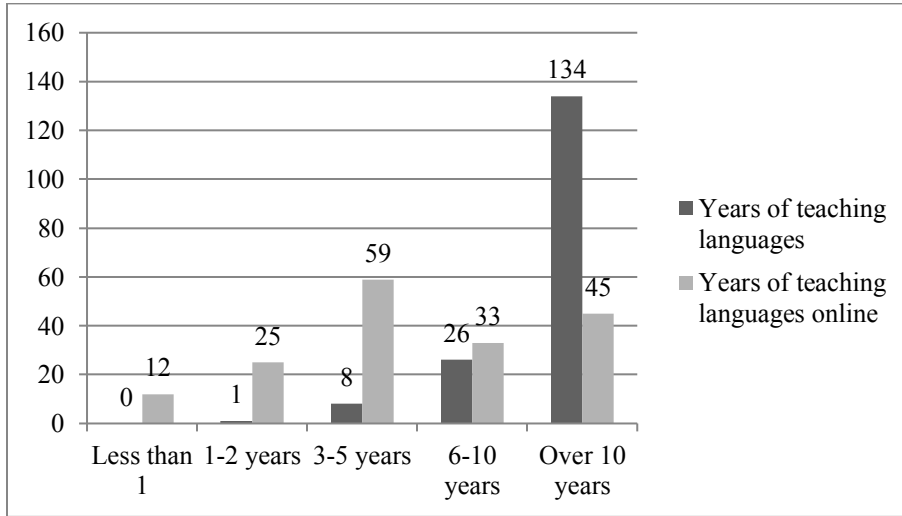
To address these questions the authors developed an online survey (Appendix A) that consisted of 1) two questions related to language teaching experience and online teaching experience, 2) a question to record the format of online teaching (fully online, blended or both), 3) a question to elicit participants' sources of knowledge and skills, and 4) an open-ended question regarding how respondents' prior learning experiences influenced the ways they teach online. To increase reliability and validity, the questions were based on research related to possible sources of professional development in online instruction. By including open-ended question #5 and an option "other" in question #4, participants could express their own thoughts and experiences concerning how their online teaching practices evolved.

Our aim was to involve as many higher education language educators from around the world as possible. A link to the anonymous online survey was emailed to approximately 1,500 individuals whose email addresses were retrieved from (a) college and university emails listed in the course schedule sections on official web sites, and (b) individual emails of authors who have published on the topic in peer-reviewed scholarly journals such as *Language Teaching & Technology*, *CALICO*, *CALL*, and *System*.

The aggregating site HigherEd360 (Colleges & Universities Employment Pages and Profiles, n/d) was used to access web sites of institutions of higher education. Using the search terms "course schedule" or "class schedule," online language courses were located along with instructor email contacts. The main criterion was instructors' email address accessibility via course search engines and via departmental websites. In addition, the link to the survey was disseminated through professional listservs of organizations concerned with teaching languages or teaching with technologies such as CALICO (the Computer-Assisted Language Instruction Consortium, n/d), MERLOT (Merlot, n/d), , and Dartmouth (Dartmouth, n/d) and via social networks of the authors (Facebook and Twitter).

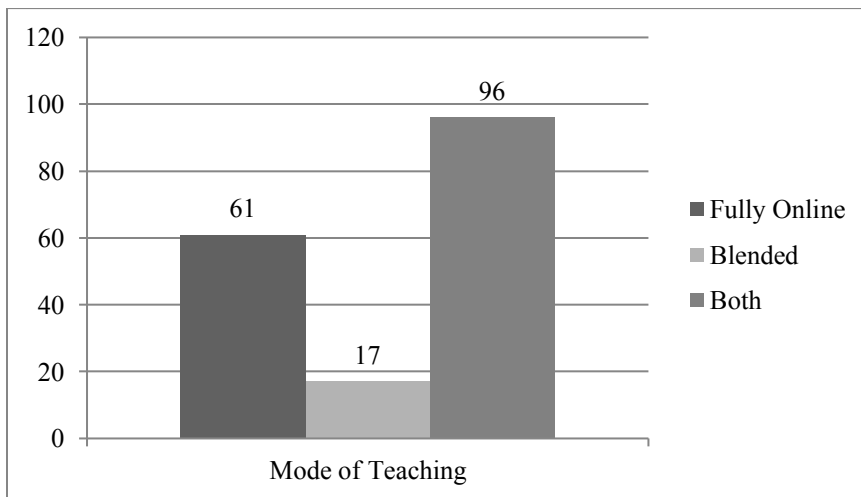
In total, 174 respondents completed the survey. Among the respondents who completed questions 1 and 2, seventy eight participants (almost 45%) have taught online for more than five years with 45 of them (26%) having over 10 years of teaching languages online experience (Figure 1). Their expertise is particularly important given the range of experiences that inform their responses. Indeed, it is widely recognized that more experienced educators are able to identify critical classroom situations and to draw on their theoretical knowledge to classify and interpret these situations (Palmer et al., 2005).

Figure 1
Years of Teaching Languages Overall and Online.



Study participants were also asked to report on modes of online teaching—fully online, blended, or both. Results indicated that 96 respondents (55%) teach in both formats, 61 (35%) only online, while 17 survey participants (almost 10%) teach in a blended format (Figure 2).

Figure 2
Modes of Instruction



To collect additional, in-depth data for analysis, online interviews were conducted. To recruit participants for the follow-up interviews the final survey question asked for permission to contact those respondents willing to participate. The pool of those who provided their contact information consisted of 96 educators. Twenty respondents were purposefully selected out of that pool to ensure a range of participant online teaching experiences but keeping the number of interviews practical for the current study. Nine of the selected were then able to schedule a synchronous online interview via Adobe Connect, which was recorded, transcribed and analyzed.

Table 1 below summarizes the background of the online language instructors who were interviewed. There were two males and seven females. Their college-level experiences teaching languages online varied from 1-2 to over 10 years with most of them teaching Spanish fully online.

Table 1
Participant Information

Interviewees	Gender	Years of Online Language Teaching	Languages Taught Online	Mode of Teaching
Jim	Male	1-2	Spanish/French	blended & fully online
Randi	Female	4	Spanish/Italian	fully online
Kate	Female	6-10	Spanish	blended & fully online
Ellen	Female	3-5	Spanish	blended & fully online
Dana	Female	6-10	Spanish	blended & fully online
Chris	Female	3-5	Spanish/ French	fully online
Frank	Male	3-5	Spanish	blended & fully online
Jane	Female	3-5	French/Arabic	fully online
Fran	Female	over 10	Russian	fully online

The entire dataset was collected in 2019. It consists of 1) 174 responses to five multiple-choice questions, 2) 93 responses to question #4 that asked respondents to specify “What are some of your sources of knowledge and skill when it comes to teaching languages online?” 3) 158 responses to open-ended question #5: “How do you see these prior learning experiences influence the ways you teach online?” and 4) recorded interviews (each from 10 to 28 minutes in length) with the nine online instructors (Table 1). Responses to the four multiple-choice questions were analyzed quantitatively (i.e., in percentages) and plotted visually in relation to emerging themes in the open-ended data. These quantitative data helped us to recognize trends within the overall cohort while also ascertaining how our interviewees’ profiles fit in this larger picture and were analyzed using simple Excel percentage comparisons. Answers to the open-ended survey question and interviews went through two rounds of coding undertaken by two researchers independently. In the first round, researchers based their analysis on the three major themes that emerged through the literature review: 1) learning to teach with peers, 2) learning to teach online through formal instruction, 3) learning to teach via models. The first round enabled the researchers to identify a range of codes, such as “self-learning” or “networking.” The two coders compared and refined their preliminary findings and initiated a second round of coding that enabled them to iteratively group the findings into eight categories presented in the Results subsections to follow.

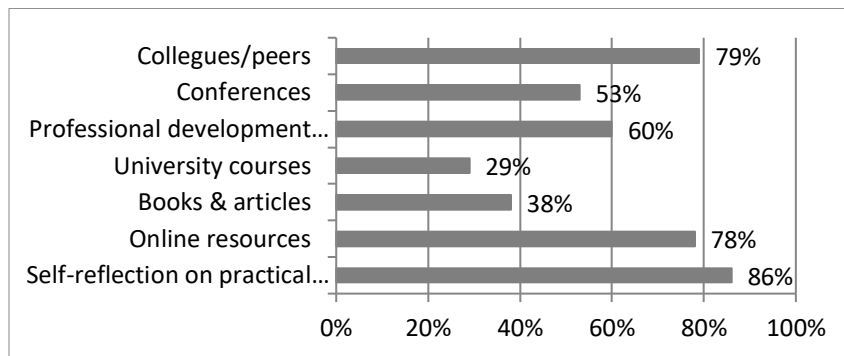
The study design ensured the collection of rich data from several sources that were analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively by the authors. While this contributed to the validity and reliability of study findings, they are limited in terms of generalizability due to our sample size and because survey participants came from a convenience sample rather than a probability one. To mitigate limitations and increase transferability of results, the selection of interviewees was controlled for online teaching experience (from beginners in online teaching to experienced online instructors) and for the format of teaching (fully online or blended and fully online).

Results

To understand how online language instructors develop their craft, survey respondents were asked the following question: “What are some of your sources of knowledge and skill when it comes to teaching languages online? (Select all that apply).” Respondents selected one or several of the seven choices while also specifying ‘other’ responses (see Figure 3). Results indicate that respondents develop knowledge and skill related to teaching languages online in several ways. Reflection on practical experiences, conferring with colleagues/peers, and online resources are the three most frequently reported responses: 86%, 79%, and 78% of study participants respectively (Figure 3). Conferences and professional development workshops are also important sources of knowledge and skill for 60% and 53% respectively. Books and articles in the field, indicated by 39% of respondents, are important means for enriching professional skills. Only 29% received formal education through workshops and courses provided by their institutions.

Figure 3

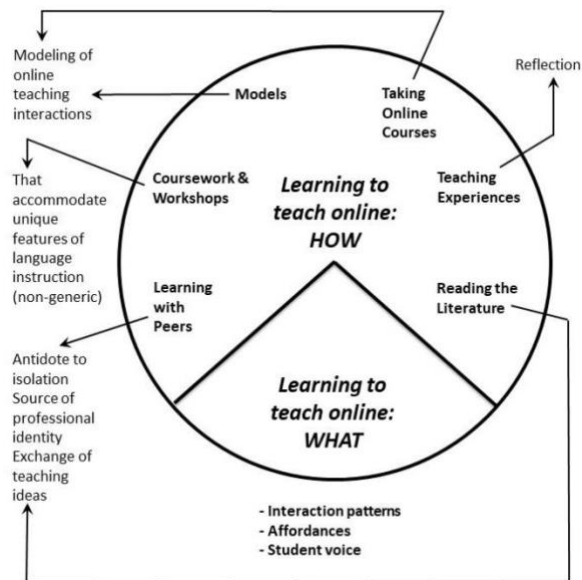
Results for the Survey Question “What are Some of Your Sources of Knowledge and Skill When it Comes to Teaching Languages Online? (Select All That Apply)”



Instructor Strategies: How

Analysis of the qualitative dataset—open-ended survey questions and transcriptions of the nine online interviews—generated overarching themes, subthemes and their interrelationships as represented in Figure 4. Responses generally fell into two broad categories: *how* respondents learned to teach online and *what* they learned. Predominant themes within each of these two categories will each be illustrated and elaborated on in the sections that follow. Finally, the periphery of Figure 4 provides further elaboration while indicating the interrelationships we found between major themes.

Figure 4
Thematic Categories for Learning to Teach Languages Online



Taking online courses. Many respondents cited their experiences taking courses as students, especially online *language* courses, as formative and informative as regards their own online teaching repertoires. To try to walk in the shoes of online learners was cited as an extremely valuable way to become a better online language educator. Comments included what their online educators did wrong and how they had learned from such negative examples of online instruction:

I've taken a few online courses where the only feedback the instructor provided was Good Job! This is unacceptable. I want my students to know that I take their learning and my teaching seriously because I do. (survey respondent)

I have taken a lot of online classes and my experiences in those courses have shaped my own courses. I take what I liked as a student and use that but avoid doing the things that created stress when I was taking courses online. (survey respondent)

I had taken some online classes and I was frustrated with the set-up of the class and lack of attention to enticing me to the information. I wanted to change that. I still want to change that. (survey respondent)

Design and teaching weaknesses were not the only source of learning from the perspective of an online student. The experience overall was widely deemed valuable in making future pedagogical decisions. As one survey respondent articulated, "One of the most useful things is to take web-based and hybrid courses oneself and have the students' experience." Indeed, experiencing online teaching from the students' perspective is seen as a productive means of

becoming familiar with online affordances and concomitant pedagogical potential and several respondents reported this being the case in their development.

Classroom experiences. Traditional in-person classroom experience also appears to serve as an important resource for many online language educators and was cited as a major source of knowledge and skill. One survey respondent, for example, stated: “You help them to improve because of your experience. That doesn’t come from the course, that comes from your experience teaching languages.” Another survey participant agreed: “My having taught these courses in person was what made it possible to develop the online sister course.”

While many online instructors cited their traditional classroom experience as informing their transition to online teaching, one survey respondent stated:

I find that the most important part of teaching online is to NOT want to replicate past teaching practices (at least not necessarily) but instead to investigate what the affordances of new technological tools are and envision what new forms of pedagogies can be deployed.

Many respondents reported that they are “self-taught” through trial and error. As one survey respondent put it: “practice makes perfect!” and goes on to say

Having extensive classroom experience, part of the learning process when creating an online course is understanding not only what is generally effective (e.g. domain-specific pedagogy, best practices, etc.), but also what must be tailored to an online environment and cohort. Just as my face-to-face teaching goes through several iterations, so too does my online teaching as I learn from trial-and-error.

During his interview, Chris emphasized the experimental nature of developing online teaching skills. “It’s all experiential, try things out; work through it, see how it works.” Some respondents reported having learned what works from their students—through course evaluations: “My first one [online course] was abysmal, I had to do something!” (Kathy, interview). And Dana lamented that the “language classes developed by her Instructional Technology services were awful, I had to do it my own way!”

Survey comments underscore the trial and error aspect involved in developing as an online language educator:

Tweaking and improving on what I’m already doing as I learn what works and what doesn’t from my students! (survey respondent)

It’s trial and error. I’m constantly adding and discarding ideas! (survey respondent)

I have drawn from experiences to formulate methods and by trial and error have seen what seems to work and what I can tweak to make a more engaging environment for students. (survey respondent)

I think seeing how students interact with the material has been the greatest teacher.
(survey respondent)

These observations are consistent with a rare study of a self-taught online language educator. In a close examination of his own self-instructed online language teaching, Lewis points to the trial and error aspects when it came to how to handle the technology's affordances, course management issues and the fact of student and teacher anxiety using the target language (Lewis, 2006).

Reading the literature. Although anecdotally prevalent, there is little research on the impact reading professional literature has on instructional practice. Kamiya and Loewen (2014), however, did determine some influence related to reading relevant literature in Teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) professional development contexts. In our study, a wide range of professional publications were cited by both our survey and interview respondents. For example, one of our survey respondents reported that she learned best “from the tons of literature I've read.” She goes on to point specifically to “case studies and field narratives” as being the most impactful for her in her online teaching. Another survey respondent wrote that reading professional literature gave her a sense of community: “Reading lots of articles helped me feel less isolated in this field.”

Data indicate that reading professional literature is routine for many. It is sometimes associated with doing research, something that many study participants reported undertaking:

I read, I research, and I look for all opportunities to enrich my knowledge and increase my competence at online language instruction. (survey respondent)

Books: I have a list too long to list here! I buy new ones each year. (survey respondent)

All books I review for journals and all articles that interest me (asking me to list them here is undoable). (survey respondent)

There is certainly no shortage of publications about teaching languages online. From scholarly research journals to practitioner-oriented publications, those with motivation to independently develop their skills and understandings have vast opportunities to do so. In addition to formal research articles, practitioner websites offer readings for those seeking knowledge and practical ideas. Many respondents reported drawing on this wealth of resources.

Learning via peer collaboration. In her interview, Kate underscored her initial sense of isolation and lack of accessibility to what she needed to know in order to become an accomplished online language educator. Eventually she stumbled upon an online peer who became her informal mentor and, eventually, a vital influence in her professional development.

I had to learn as I go. I took a maternity leave as I was designing, so had time to think about [my courses]. I interviewed an instructor who taught online – the only person I could find, she generously shared her ideas, sent me screen shots...

Interaction between and among community members is foundational to the professional growth of educators (Borko, 2004; Hadar & Brody, 2013; ten Dam & Blom, 2006) and can be greatly supported and enhanced via online collaborations and consultations. Such connection and community help interlocutors shape their sense of self as professional educators and reinforce continually evolving online identities. Online environments, especially social media, represent natural sources of knowledge about online teaching: “I have learned new skills thanks to hundreds of students and instructors online” (from survey). This statement is echoed by several other respondents:

A lot of thinking and talking with my peers about how to do it and how to make the entire process better and closer to face to face experiences was important. (survey respondent)

Talking to other instructors was helpful in the way it showed me how they go through the same issues and struggles I’m experiencing. (survey respondent)
Working with mentors, peers, and mentees, developing new curriculum and improving existing ones. (survey respondent)

Frank is an active member of his state-wide professional organization where he networks with other online language educators to “swap activities, texts.” Dana reports that she enjoys sharing with colleagues through webinars and when attending conferences where idea sharing is generally encouraged. She also “share(s) ideas on listservs, professional organizations, Facebook, informal idea exchanges” and similar.

The ‘just-in-time’ aspect of access to knowledgeable peers was also cited as invaluable by survey respondents:

It has been very helpful to know I have someone with experience that I can call and request from. (survey respondent)

My colleagues and mentor have set up excellent programs, and I find when I follow their models and practices, my students do better. (survey respondent)

The field is under construction, I talk to colleagues, ideas from colleagues as to what work. (Frank, interview)

The power of such peer support has been reported elsewhere as a highly preferred means for educators to learn how to utilize technology in education (Meskill et al., 2020).

Learning via coursework and workshops. As indicated earlier, formal training for almost 60% of respondents took the form of professional development workshops (Figure 3). Study participants indicated that they frequently took advantage of opportunities such as professional development courses and workshops. These were often organized by professional organizations such as ACTFL, CALICO, EUROCALL or IALLT. Online workshops and webinars were also popular means for professional growth. Language educators with substantial online teaching experience also told stories of not having had access to formal training opportunities nor institutional support for moving their courses online “back in the day.” One

survey participant compared past and present opportunities for training:

Our campus has ongoing workshops and individual help for the technologies we use in online teaching that is available year round. This was not always the case, however, and there have been nasty bumps along the road at times. (survey respondent)

One long-term veteran of language and technology, Chris, emphasized the importance of constant engagement in professional development in new technologies. She sees an ongoing need for new skills in understanding online affordances to be fresh and responsive to learners' needs. In terms of her own professional development, Chris reported that "the university had an initiative to support faculty training and presented broad ideas of online teaching and learning but language teaching is different, so I learned mostly on the fly."

Randi's institution offers a generic training package for online educators. She reports having taken advantage of all trainings possible, having been "motivated to change" after receiving far from flattering student evaluations on her first online course. "I was a literature major. I had had one methods course!" Two emphases the training that Randi reports having strongly influenced her online instruction were 1) student centeredness; and 2) emphasis on authentic experiences. She tailors activities in her language courses to fit individual student's learning and she often has her students undertake virtual visits to Spanish institutions and popular venues for authentic target language immersion.

At Frank's institution there is a certification program with three self-paced online courses which he completed and then went on to "design the course with help of ITS (Instructional Technology Services). I need technology to find a way to accommodate my teaching needs as a language educator. The more questions I asked, the more they accommodated."

However, interviewees and survey respondents were mixed concerning the efficacy of institutionally provided professional development chiefly because these offerings rarely addressed *language* instruction. Most reported having taken online workshops, some self-sought, most institutionally provided and, often, courses on online instruction in general:

Workshops are fundamental, but piecemeal. While best practices in distance education in general is a well-developed area of study, teaching languages and cultures online is still in a nascent stage. (survey respondent)

Primarily in making me aware of specific tools and strategies for online teaching that would take me a long time to locate and evaluate on my own. (survey respondent)

Language textbook publishers and software distributors also supply formal training for online educators. A handful of study participants cited these as something they had completed as part of their training. Going beyond technology-oriented professional development, Frank, clearly a socially and communication-oriented instructor, reported that a theater workshop had helped him prepare for the kind of lively interaction he enjoyed orchestrating with his students online.

Ellen reported how she "figure(d) out a lot of work-arounds, you have to, everything is so new, lots of the tech experts can't answer my questions, I ask lots of how to questions with language teaching knowledge in my head." Finally, one survey respondent who self-identified as technologically savvy was adamant that "when it comes to actual EDUCATION, many of the

whiz-bang online learning tools that publishers and commercial developers are using are NO MORE EFFECTIVE than the old Apple IIe programs I used decades ago.”

Learning via models. Study participants frequently cited models—former educators or colleagues and/or exemplars of teaching online—as a critical source of their professional development.

It is helpful to see other courses to get ideas of what works well for others. (survey respondent)

I take what I liked as a student and use that but avoid doing the things that created stress when I was taking courses online. (survey respondent)

One participant reported using YouTube videos extensively to seek out models of effective online teaching. “Even videos of live classrooms like Khan Academy help me think more about what I do and how (survey respondent). Another source of models was former instructors. Dana, in particular, spoke of her role model with great reverence and enthusiasm:

The role model for teaching was my statistics professor who was clear about his objectives. I do this for my students: clear instructions and objectives—no complicated language.

When discussing the most important influences in her development as an online language teacher, Ellen states unequivocally that she teaches “the way I was taught.” Kate too reports teaching “the way I was taught, don’t like boring approaches, make it fun.” This was a common theme throughout our data. This underscores the fact that the large portion of our lifetimes that we spend as students cannot help but influence our ideas of what it means to be an educator.

Instructor Strategies: What

Modifying interaction/feedback patterns. For many respondents, their direct experience teaching languages online resulted in the need to change their patterns of instructional interaction and feedback: “They [the medium’s affordances] inform both how I design online instruction and how I interact with colleagues and students in the online environment.” They reported shifts in interactional patterns due to the environment and its affordances:

Importance of communication and interaction between students, and between me and the students. (survey respondent)

I spend a lot of time on providing feedback to the students on the assignments that are challenging and that require their time and effort. (survey respondent)

And rethinking the interactional structures of their teaching:

I think about how to make online engaging-- as if you are in a classroom and need to answer/ want to join in. That's difficult! So my YouTube channel can help, or a fun/ extra email with a link, besides extra reminders and hellos. I want them to

know I am thinking about them and I'm "present" in their class experience. (Survey respondent)

Respondents learned the importance of teacher presence and active engagement with and between students and that this often requires extra effort: "It's all about generating ideas for course design that engages students and creates active learners." Another respondent indicated that while learning how to teach online she was able to see how to empower her students' learning agency:

It is a lot easier with today's technological tools to turn one's students into authors that are given the opportunity to use language in public-facing discursive communities (e.g., discussion boards, blogs, video hosting sites, fan fiction sites, book writing sites). (survey respondent)

Affordances. Learning how to teach online for many study participants meant learning about new forms of technology and this, of course, changed their views of technology as a language teaching tool. While some survey and interview respondents expressed frustration with how technical limitations constrained their teaching, others expressed passion for the products their institutions chose to adopt. As one survey respondent opined: "I adore [Canvas, Bb, etc.]" The majority lauded the inherent personalization of communicative affordances of the online medium and the high quality opportunities for students to exercise and develop their voices in the new language.

Finally, for participants with several years of experience with online language instruction, there was clear recognition concerning the ongoing nature of professional development. In this way one continues to be a learner of teaching and pedagogical design, a notion expressed by several participants. One survey respondent in particular noted the flexibility that was required due to the disorderly nature of the craft: "The field is in a state my colleagues and I call 'permanent disruption,' therefore I am always willing to change and make adjustments." Another noted how teaching online requires keeping up with changing technologies and students: "It's all process. My online teaching is always morphing as affordances, contexts and populations change." While another mentioned how educators, like students, grow with time and experience:

I think just as students we grow as time passes. All of the experiences and information I see helps shape my teaching practices. Continued learning is key to sustaining and improving success as online instructor. (survey respondent)

Discussion

Recent shifts in educator professional development, away from prescriptive "best practices" towards viewing teaching as an ongoing, transformative endeavor, are gaining traction (Curran & Murray, 2008; Hawkins, 2004; Johnson, 2006). The results of our inquiry on how post-secondary language educators learn to teach online speak to the individuality, energy, diversity and sustained motivation of these educators and their commitment to serving their students' language learning needs in ways that make sense to them. Study participants report a variety of means whereby they develop such knowledge and skills and what experiences they see as important in developing as effective online language educators. In terms of how they did so, respondents report that they sought out *learning with peers*, *learning through formal instruction*, *learning via models*, and *experience with reflection* as primary strategies.

Learning with Peers

Elaborating on the role of peer learning, respondents emphasized the aspect of isolation when teaching online and how peer networking and reading publications in the field can be antidotes to that isolation. Moreover, growth and development thrive on professional interactions and, as some respondents indicate, such interactions contribute to their sense of professional identity as well as their teaching repertoires. Finally, respondents lauded the practice of sharing and swapping teaching ideas and materials via social networks, an area ripe for professional development design research.

Formal Instruction

In addition to learning with peers, our respondents highlight two missing pieces of the formal instruction available to them: 1) the fact that so little addresses the unique needs and characteristics of *language* instruction; and 2) that professional development needs to be ongoing and on-demand, “not a one shot deal” as one respondent expressed it. Clearly, entities responsible for providing instructor development and support need to be clear that teaching languages online is fundamentally different from teaching other subjects and that specialized course and workshop design should be implemented accordingly. The theme of the continual need for growth, development, and instructional support when teaching languages online consistently runs through these data as well. Formal professional development experiences reported here were one-time closed curricula: a set of material at the end of which one has purportedly gained sufficient knowledge to go on to perform adequately. However, developing skills and knowledge to teach languages online is complex and dynamic. For these dedicated professionals, it has no end point. Participants reported learning a great deal from their students’ responses to their teaching, a key component which is, by nature, ongoing (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Johnson, 2006; Stein et al., 1999) as is ongoing learning with, through, and from peers. This is strongly reflected in the contexts of ongoing collegial exchange, just in time learning, and in the experimental aspects of the enterprise. Implications for course and workshop providers are clear: follow-on and follow-through are critical components of professional development as so much of what is learned about teaching online is learned by doing. On-demand, after-the-fact instructional support is vital. Institutional forms of faculty support would do well to recognize such preferences and incorporate ongoing collaborations into their formal offerings.

Learning Through Models

As for the third primary source, learning to teach online via models, our respondents could not have been more explicit concerning the centrality of this feature in their learning and development. While echoing the extant literature regarding video recordings of model teaching and teaching the way one is taught, participants underscored the value of being a student in more than one online course. As online students they could directly experience the unique practices that the online venue affords as well as mistakes that can be made.

Experience and Reflection

Beyond learning with peers, formal instruction and models, our participants discussed the centrality of experimentation in their online teaching. Indeed, a full 86% of survey respondents pointed to *self-reflection on practical experience* as their most valued form of development. The medium and its affordances being relatively new, experimentation would be expected and, within

formal learning and institutional structures, supported and encouraged. Many also reported that it was in the traditional classroom where they had developed foundational skills in understanding students' language learning processes and the best way to guide and facilitate these. Modifications were necessitated by the fact of online structures and constraints. Respondents articulated how patterns of interaction had to thereby change, most often for the better, online. For many, synchronous and asynchronous conversations between students and students and students and their teacher became venues ripe for authentic, motivated language practice where all students could exercise their voices in the target language.

Implications

What is noteworthy for this group of respondents is that they clearly value the human dimension of online teaching over the technological. Participants' reports and reflections are far less technology-oriented than typical institutional online training offerings would imply. The totality of their responses begs the question, what and how much do online language educators need to know about technology per se? Early in the brief history of professional development for online language education, it became clear what kinds of professional development would *not* be useful: namely, courses that focused on developing basic computer skills and learning the specifics of various Learning Management System's (LMS) tools and features (Compton, 2009). Many respondents reported having availed themselves of their institutions' generic LMS training opportunities to learn how to operate the software with which they were supplied. Others said they opted to seek on-demand answers to their technology questions via the internet. This again underscores the ongoing, experimental aspect of learning to teach online. Transmission of knowledge approaches to educator training rarely acknowledge and properly support the transformation to educators' sense of professionalism that results from moving from traditional classroom-based teaching to online teaching. The shift goes beyond the acquisition of technical skills and requires pedagogical understanding of the medium's affordances and an acceptance of one's accompanying new roles and identities (Comas-Quinn, 2011, 2012; Kanno & Stuart, 2011).

Study participants report seeing value in working with others, in collaborating and developing ideas dialogically rather than being handed formulae. For this group, expertise in online teaching develops collaboratively with educators exercising their own developing voices and visions. Data also suggest that such forms of collaboration should be ongoing as growth and improvement in online teaching skills never cease. Indeed, the majority of study participants underscore this in their responses: ongoing learning with, though, and by peers, observations/modeling and the exchange and development of ideas comprise their preferred approaches in learning to teach languages online. Institutional forms of faculty support would do well to incorporate such preferences and foci into their offerings.

Conclusion

As more language educators come to teach online and/or are initially trained to teach online, research that tracks their processes and learning outcomes is vital. Future research in this domain might include longitudinal investigations of professional development activities, processes, and outcomes as reflected in language course design and student learning. From this group of language educators, we see both consensus and novel insights through which recommendations for language educator support can be made and new areas of inquiry established. Two of these—the ongoing and social nature of professional development for online

language instruction—should be recognized, institutionally instantiated, and researched in ways that parallel our ever-changing understandings about teaching with technologies.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declared no conflicts of interest.

Ethical Approval

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Appendix A

Survey Questions

1. How long have you been teaching language(s)?
 - Less than 1 year
 - 1-2 years
 - 3-5 years
 - 6-10 years
 - over 10 years
2. How long have you been teaching *language(s)* online?
 - Less than 1 year
 - 1-2 years
 - 3-5 years
 - 6-10 years
 - over 10 years
3. Do you teach languages
 - fully online
 - blended
 - both
4. What are some of your sources of knowledge and skill when it comes to teaching languages online (Select all that apply):
 - Colleagues/peers
 - Conferences (please specify which)
 - Professional development workshops (please specify which)
 - University courses (please specify which)
 - Books and articles (please specify which)
 - Online resources
 - Self-reflection on practical experience
 - Other (please specify)
5. How do you see these prior learning experiences influencing the ways you teach online?
6. We would like to conduct follow-up interviews to clarify your answers and to deepen understanding about how you *are developing as online language teacher*. If you don't mind if we contact you via Skype for a 30-40 minute interview, please write your name and your email address to set up a meeting time.

Name: _____

Email: _____

Appendix B

Interview Questions

1. In an ideal world, my online teaching would look like:
2. Describe the philosophy and instructional approaches of your favorite teacher, online or live.
3. Describe your view of yourself as an online educator. How do you see yourself as an online educator in the future?
4. How might your online students describe you as an online teacher?
5. If you were asked by a colleague to describe yourself as an online educator, what would you say?
6. What sorts of experiences do you see as most beneficial in developing as an online language educator?
7. What particular kinds of knowledge and reasoning do you see coming into play when considering online language teaching?
8. Other observations about teaching and learning online that you would like to share?
9. Challenges?

Appendix C

Recruitment Letter

Invitation to Participate in an Online Language Educator Study

We are seeking experienced online language educators to participate in a study on the development of teaching skills for online language teaching.

If you are or ever have been an online language educator, please complete our questionnaire regarding your experiences. It will take approximately 15 minutes of your time to complete (the link is included below).

Click on this link or copy and paste it into your browser to access the survey:

Thank you for your consideration.
Please let us know if you have questions.