

# Support

## Where It's Needed: Helping Language Professionals to Develop Online Teaching Skills for the 21st Century Classroom

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The DOTS (Developing Online Teaching Skills) workshop provides modular, flexible, clearly structured and immediately implementable activities in different languages designed to help language teaching professionals develop their online teaching skills. The use of a Moodle-based workspace as a central resource serves not only as a repository of teaching materials but also ensures that participants are able to exchange opinions and experiences after the workshop has ended, allowing for a gradual development of a sustainable online community of language professionals.

### Introduction

The mission of the Council of Europe's European Centre for Modern Languages (ECML) is to *encourage excellence and innovation in language teaching* in its Member States (<http://www.ecml.at/Aboutus/tabid/118/language/en-GB/Default.aspx>). As part of its 2012-2015 programme *Learning through languages: promoting inclusive, plurilingual and intercultural education*, it is supporting 15 projects and a number of targeted support activities. The projects seek to develop new tools facilitating the application and mediation of the ECML long-term vision (<http://www.ecml.at/Programme/Programme20122015/Longtermvision/tabid/727/language/en-GB/Default.aspx>) in a way which can benefit all member states, while the targeted support activities focus on the needs of a particular country within a number of areas identified as significant by the ECML Member States.

Developing Online Teaching Skills (DOTS) is one of the targeted support activities, led by a team of experts from the UK, Germany, Spain, Croatia and the USA. It offers awareness raising and training workshops for teachers, teacher trainers and language mediators. These workshops emphasize the pedagogical considerations behind the use of a particular online technology to learn languages, aiming to maximize its benefits in a particular teaching context. Currently, the DOTS targeted support workshops are in the piloting stage (2012-2013) and one of the first countries where they will be piloted is Poland, during the conference entitled *ICTs and Social Media in Language Education*, programmed as part of the European Day of Languages (Cf. <http://www.edj.waw.pl/konferencja>).

In this paper we present the rationale behind the DOTS targeted support activity and an outline of the workshop. We believe that online teaching skills are essential in the 21<sup>st</sup> century language classroom, but they need to be based on an approach where language learning pedagogy is supported by technology. We argue that the best way to achieve this is

through socio-cultural and constructivist theories of learning, which naturally translates into using a blended approach to our workshops, where the online element is presented through the DOTS workspace constructed on the Moodle platform.

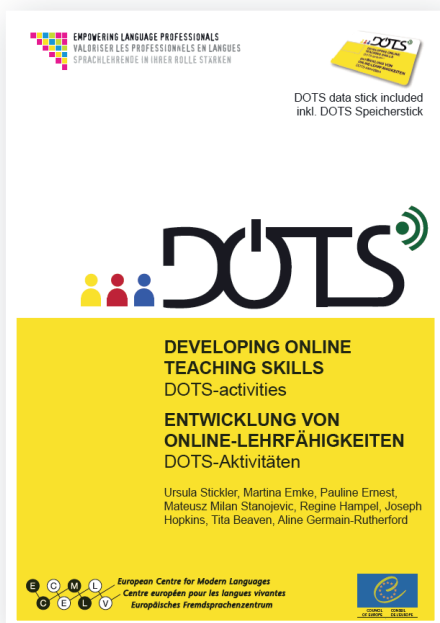
### Rationale for the DOTS targeted support

There are a variety of European strategic documents which declare the importance of foreign languages and online technologies. For instance, the key competences of all citizens of the knowledge society include communication in the mother tongue and in foreign languages, digital and technological competence, etc. (European Commission 2004). Teachers educating citizens of the knowledge society should be qualified to use new technologies (cf. the so-called Lisbon Strategy; European Council 2000) and this is recognized in strategies adopted by specific European countries (cf. the Polish National Strategic Reference Framework 2007-2013 which mentions e-learning and self-training; *Narodowe strategiczne ramy odniesienia* 2007-2013 2007:66).

Training of language teachers to use online tools and create online materials tends to be relatively well supported all over Europe: a recent survey has shown that over half of the respondents from throughout Europe have attended some sort of formal training (Beaven *et al.* 2010:15). Alongside their existing training, teachers are willing to receive additional training on tools they are not familiar with (Beaven *et al.* 2010:16).

In spite of teachers' willingness to *learn to use* ICTs, they do not tend to *integrate* ICTs in their teaching unless they believe that ICTs will be more effective than traditional methods and will not disrupt their teaching, and unless they believe they have sufficient ability and resources to use the technology (Zhao and Cziko 2001:27). In order for teachers to achieve a level where they can comfortably hold these beliefs, there are a variety of issues to be taken into account (for an overview cf. Beaven *et al.* 2010:9-11), one being that teacher training should integrate both pedagogy and technology (Hubbard and Levy 2006:ix). In other words, teachers must be aware of the affordances of a particular technology to be able to use it successfully, in line with pedagogical principles (Hampel 2012).

It seems that a lack of effective integration of ICTs into teaching may also be felt by students, at least in some contexts. A recent survey of secondary school students on the use of new technologies in Polish schools has shown that students perceive teachers as not having sufficient competences in the use of ICTs in the classroom, as seen for example, via



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infrequent use of email or Skype to communicate with their students (Kwiatkowska and Dąbrowski 2012:13-14).

We believe that using ICTs in the classroom provides a crucial opportunity to employ a student-centred approach (cf. e.g. Zhao and Cziko 2001). Therefore, our approach in the DOTS targeted support activity is informed by socio-cultural and constructivist theories, in terms of pedagogy (Arnold and Schüssler 2003) as well as technology (Dougiamas 1998). We consider learning to be a constructive activity: we see it as a constant process of striking a balance between perceptions of the environment and our internal representations (Glaserfeld 2007), rather than the transmission of knowledge. In this process collaboration is crucial – a learner's developmental potential in collaboration with his/her more capable peers is greater than when learning alone (cf. e.g. Vygotsky 1978:86).

Therefore, training for online teaching ideally needs to be an experiential process of learning: by trying out online environments and tools, by being placed in the position of a learner, language teachers can fully appreciate the difficulties entailed and develop coping and compensation strategies for technology-mediated teaching. The experiential and collaborative approach is particularly useful in online environments, with web 2.0 tools facilitating collaboration in online settings. In order for teachers to be able to foster a student-centred and collaborative approach in their teaching, teacher training is of paramount importance (Hampel 2009).

### The DOTS targeted support

In line with this broad context, the DOTS targeted support offers awareness-raising and training workshops to support language teaching professionals in using online technologies. They are organized in the ECML Member States, and are suited to the specific needs of the local context. The workshops are very flexible with regard to their objectives and implementation, although they typically consist of: (1) negotiating specific learning objectives with the local organizer; (2) promoting hands-on work, reflection and sharing during a face-to-face meeting of the workshop participants; (3) promoting continued participant involvement (online element); and (4) ensuring a cascading effect.

In the first phase, specific learning objectives, skills and competences are negotiated in detail with the local organizer, usually a person involved in teacher training. This is crucial because the local organizer will be aware of the needs in the local context. Based on this, a participant profile is drafted, which may include teachers, teacher trainers and/or decision makers. The workshop may focus on a variety of specific issues (e.g. awareness raising, skills on using a specific tool, dealing with a specific language skill in a blended/online classroom, etc.), all of which are informed by the integration of pedagogy and technology.

The workshop (lasting from 2 hours to 2 days) is usually a face-to-face event, moderated by two members

of the DOTS team, and it includes a significant hands-on element and participant input. Ideally, laptops with Internet access will be available, allowing hands-on activities on the DOTS workspace. In addition to working on the specific objectives defined in the first phase, the workshop also tries to facilitate a dialogue between workshop participants and aims to carry over the dialogue onto the online workspace. Conducting the workshops initially in a face-to-face setting gives the DOTS team the opportunity to adapt to local necessities and make on-the-spot changes to the original format as needed. The central resource in any targeted support activity is the DOTS workspace (<http://moodle.dots.ecml.at/>), which contains a number of training activities for the use of online tools (in a variety of languages) and social tools (enabling the cooperation of workspace participants). The workspace is the result of the DOTS project (<http://dots.ecml.at/>), supported by the ECML in its 2008-2011 programme. The project developed a number of bite-size self-training activities teaching how to use Audacity, audioconferencing, videoconferencing, wikis, Moodle quizzes, the Moodle platform, Youtube, blogs, podcasts and forums. These activities are flexible (to accommodate different levels of technological expertise), modular (they can be started or stopped at any point), clearly structured into three parts with immediately implementable practical steps and a reflection task, and they combine theory and practice to accommodate for different learning styles (cf. Stickler et al. 2010). The DOTS workspace is freely available, and currently has 295 registered users. All the activities are available in English, and most are available in German, Spanish, and Turkish. Translations into Polish, Chinese, Catalan and Croatian are under way.

In addition to the activities, the DOTS workspace includes a number of forums and wikis enabling users to communicate with each other, sharing their practices and activities they might have used themselves. Workshop participants are encouraged to become involved in the workspace, to support the lifelong learning aspect of their (self-)training. It is our aim to build on this, eventually creating a completely self-sustaining community of practice.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The notion of „community of practice” is linked to the theory of learning as social participation, whereby individuals are grounded in communities which legitimize and enable the development of their practices (Lave and Wenger 1991). This promotes deeper levels of knowledge processing and retention (cf. e.g. Wenger *et al.* 2002). People who engage in a process of collective learning in a shared domain form a community of practice (Wenger 1998).

Finally, the workshops are designed to promote a cascading effect, by encouraging workshop participants to let their colleagues know about the workspace, or help them with integrating pedagogical and technological issues. Participants may volunteer to be involved in moderating one or several of the forums on the workspace (which ensures its community-of-practice element), they can become involved in the translation of the activities, or may use the workspace, and the materials available there to conduct their own training (e.g. as part of regular in-service training or refresher courses) or adapt it to their own context. To enable this, all the materials are licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 Unported License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/>).

All of the workshop aspects are evaluated. We are currently piloting the workshop organization and its four components by offering the workshop to different audiences. The first pilot took place in Graz, Austria, and was organized through the Verein EFSZ and the Pädagogische Hochschule Graz in cooperation with the ECML as part of regular in-service training. The second and third pilot will take place in Warsaw, Poland, at the *ICTs and Social Media in Language Education* conference, and in Halden, Norway, as part of regular in-service training of teacher trainers, members of the Norwegian National Network for English and Foreign Languages. During and after the workshop its impact is evaluated via questionnaires and by collating data about overall participant activity and the popularity of particular segments of the DOTS Moodle workspace.

## Conclusion

The DOTS targeted support workshop is designed to empower teachers to use their existing pedagogical expertise and combine it with relevant ICT skills independently with the help of bite-size self-training materials. It focuses on experiential learning (“learning by doing”) by encouraging full participation *in situ* and online. The online participation via the DOTS Moodle-based workspace aims to establish a sustainable online community of language teaching professionals, which promotes learning. The approach is based on socio-cultural and constructivist theories of learning and is in line with a variety of European and local policy documents calling for lifelong learning and the development of ICT skills.

\* Wersja polska artykułu dostępna na [www.jows.pl](http://www.jows.pl)



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The DOTS team is made up of online education experts from the Open University, UK (U. Stickler, R. Hampel), Universitat Oberta de Catalunya, Spain (P. Ernest, J. Hopkins), Middlebury College, USA (A. Germain-Rutherford), b.i.b. International College, Germany (M. Emke) and the University of Zagreb (M.-M. Stanojević). They have been working together on Developing Online Teaching Skills since 2008. For data on individual authors cf. <http://dots.ecml.at/>.