



## The DOTS Project: Developing Online Teaching Skills

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Project Web site: <http://dots.ecml.at/>

Project Moodle workspace: <http://moodle.dots.ecml.at/>

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### Abstract

The affordances of ICTs for language learning are numerous. However, in order to fully realize their potential, teachers require training, something which is not available in many contexts. The Developing Online Teaching Skills (DOTS) Project, which began in 2008 through funding from the European Centre for Modern Languages (ECML), aims to bridge this gap by providing open educational training resources online focusing on the use of various ICT tools suitable for language learning. The outcome of the project is available on a Moodle site (<http://moodle.dots.ecml.at/index.php>), which was made publicly available in September 2011. The resources were developed following an initial needs analysis and are aimed at a variety of potential users, e.g., self-directed practitioners who would like to integrate ICTs into their teaching for the first time, others who already make use of technology in their classrooms but who wish to expand their options, pre-service language teachers in postgraduate courses or other teacher training programmes, etc.

The materials currently available consist of 10 “bite-sized” tutorials on the use of such tools as wikis, blogs, podcasts, and Skype. Our point of departure is that technology should not be used for technology’s sake, but rather as a means for providing opportunities to enhance learning. With this premise in mind, the tutorials deal not only with technical aspects, but also with fundamental pedagogical considerations regarding the use of specific tools. In addition, each tutorial contains practical tips and a sample learning task, along with a forum discussion activity in which users are encouraged to share their reflections and experiences with others worldwide, thereby promoting the creation of an online community of practice. All materials are freely available under a Creative Commons license and can be adapted for users’ specific contexts and/or translated into other languages.





This paper describes the process undertaken in developing the project, as well as a sample of the materials available. We will also discuss plans for Using Open Resources to Develop Online Teaching Skills: More DOTS, a two-year project recently approved by ECML, with the aim of disseminating the work completed so far among individuals working as language teachers and trainees in formal, informal and non-formal contexts.

### Background and rationale for the DOTS Project

There is no shortage of good online materials for online teaching of languages, particularly for English (see e.g. Graham Davies' overview at <http://www.camsoftpartners.co.uk/freestuff.htm> ). However, much effort and cost in creating online language learning material can be wasted without the adequate training of teachers to use it, and where training initiatives are available, these often do not go beyond dealing with the technical skills that are needed to teach in an online environment. Thus, online teaching of languages faces a predicament: despite the wealth of materials and the willingness of teachers and institutions to offer online courses, there is still a dearth of comprehensive, high quality training to teach online (Stickler & Hauck 2006). Indeed, this lack of initial and continuing staff development has been identified as one of the main reasons why online learning is not used enough (Reisinger-Schapler 2003).

To help meet this challenge, the DOTS Project has brought together a group of specialists in teaching languages to adult learners of all backgrounds, at a distance and via technology (see Table 1). The network of institutions has built on its experience in a) the teaching of different languages, b) open and distance learning, c) supported online language tuition, and d) teacher training in online teaching skills, in order to develop training materials for the project.

Table 1: DOTS team members and affiliated institutions

Team member	Institution
Ursula Stickler (Project Coordinator)	Open University, UK
Tita Beaven	Open University, UK
Pauline Ernest	Universitat Oberta de Catalunya, Spain
Martina Emke	b.i.b International College, Germany
Aline Germain-Rutherford	Middlebury College, USA
Regine Hampel	Open University, UK
Joseph Hopkins	Universitat Oberta de Catalunya, Spain
Mateusz-Milan Stanojevic	University of Zagreb, Croatia





The aims of the DOTS Project are:

- To enable language teachers to develop their online teaching skills independently with the help of bite-sized self-training materials and reflective activities
- To empower teachers to use their existing pedagogical expertise to develop relevant technological skills and to use these new competencies to improve the pedagogical design of their online courses
- To establish a network of language teachers with different levels of expertise in online teaching and encourage collaboration among them within the context of a community of practice
- To enable teachers to promote the use of new media and technology amongst their students during and after their formal language courses
- To provide equal access to online training materials in all ECML member states in a cost-effective manner via a Moodle platform
- To encourage reflection on the pedagogical aspects of new forms of teaching and language learning in order to improve the quality of online language education
- To promote lifelong learning amongst language teachers by encouraging their continued professional development

The training materials have been designed with the following end users in mind:

- Teachers working in language education who find that they need to use ICT for teaching and lack the necessary skills: The bite-sized activities have been designed so that they can be used independently or in collaboration with other independent users.
- Experienced online language tutors who want to refresh their skills in one particular area or share their knowledge and experience with other teachers: The bite-sized activities can be used as quick refreshers, and the collaborative tools can be used for "peer mentoring" and the informal sharing of expertise.
- Teacher trainers who want to integrate selected activities or suggestions into their own training programmes: The bite-sized activities and tools can be used in conjunction with institutional training.

### Phases of the project

During the three years of the DOTS Project (2008 – 2011) three workshops were held, which were crucial to the development of the training materials that were ultimately produced (see details below). These events were attended by teachers, teacher trainers, experts in CALL, and educational policymakers representing various ECML member states. In addition, the project team met regularly online, via the FlashMeeting videoconferencing tool (<http://flashmeeting.open.ac.uk/home.html>), and three times face to face, in order to discuss and take decisions on important matters related to the project as well as write training materials.





➤ **Workshop 1**

**Dates: 4-5 December 2008**

**Venue: ECML headquarters, Graz, Austria**

In this workshop, the results of a needs analysis questionnaire, sent to participants prior to their arrival, were discussed at length and conclusions were drawn with respect to the type of training language teachers in their countries required in order to use online activities successfully with their students. One element that emerged from the discussions was the importance of interaction with peers for teacher development, something which is difficult in certain settings, especially where there is only one language teacher on staff. To overcome this, it became clear that the DOTS Project should not limit itself to providing training materials, but that it should also facilitate the creation of an online community or practice where teachers could obtain ideas, feedback, and support from colleagues located in different parts of the world.

➤ **Workshop 2**

**Dates: 3-4 December 2009**

**Venue: Universitat Oberta de Catalunya, Barcelona, Spain**

In preparation for this workshop, the project team developed a provisional template for training materials and designed three draft tutorials for attendees to evaluate. Experts in CALL were invited to take part in this workshop along with other language teaching professionals and participants collaborated with the DOTS team in creating sample tutorials for the project workspace. This process led to agreement on four major points which need to be taken into account when developing online training activities:

- flexibility (to accommodate potential users' different levels of technological/pedagogical expertise)
- need for a clear structure and activities which can be implemented immediately
- consideration of different learning styles which combine theory and practice
- inclusion of activities based on learner reflection

➤ **Workshop 3**

**Dates: 10-11 March 2011**

**Venue: ECML headquarters, Graz, Austria**

In this workshop, language teachers and teacher trainers came together to pilot near-final versions of the training materials. Alongside generally positive responses, participants' suggestions for improvement were taken into account and the format of the activities was modified accordingly. Changes in the layout of the Moodle workspace were also implemented based on their feedback. In addition, during the workshop participants posted contributions to the forums and wikis within the workspace thereby helping to populate these spaces and some also volunteered to be videotaped talking about their experiences using specific online tools in their teaching.





### DOTS training materials

The final versions of the training materials were presented at the “Empowering Language Professionals” Conference held at ECML headquarters in September 2011 . Coinciding with this event, the DOTS Moodle workspace was opened to the general public (<http://moodle.dots.ecml.at/>).

After registering on the workspace, users can access tutorials guiding them through both technical and pedagogical aspects of the following tools for language teaching and learning:

- Audacity®
- Audioconferencing (Skype™)
- Blogs
- Forums
- Moodle
- Podcasting
- Quizzes
- SurveyMonkey™
- Wikis
- YouTube™

All tutorials are licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 License](#), thus allowing teachers and teacher trainers to reuse or adapt the materials to suit their individual needs. One of the guiding principles of the project was that the training materials developed for the project should be based on tools that are freely available. In the case of Skype™ and SurveyMonkey™, although these programs have pay versions that boast additional functionalities, the tutorials focus solely on the possibilities of versions that can be obtained free of charge.

Within the Moodle workspace, each tutorial exists in HTML format along with a downloadable pdf version. The materials are also available on a data stick for offline use. At present all 10 tutorials can be found in English. The project aims to offer the tutorials in multiple languages, and currently six of the tutorials are also available in German. In the future, translations of selected materials will be added in French, Spanish, and other languages. This should make access easier for speakers of languages other than English and also encourage translation into lesser used languages by users of the workspace, e.g. teacher trainers who want to adapt the materials to their own contexts.

In order to promote the development of a community of practice, each tutorial has an “Explore and Share” forum allowing users to talk about their experiences with certain tools, seek advice, provide each other with feedback, etc. In some cases, also available is a video recording of a teacher or teacher trainer talking about his or her experience in using a given tool. See Figure 1 for an example of the various resources available on the workspace for one of the tools.

In terms of structure, all tutorials consist of three main parts, or bite-sized activities, each designed to be completed in approximately 30 to 45 minutes. The first section introduces users to the tool and



encourages them to consider whether they might want to use it in their teaching. The second section deals with technical aspects and pedagogical considerations and also provides practical tips and an example of a learning activity using the tool. In the third section, users are asked to reflect on what they have learned and are invited to engage in various activities in the “Explore and Share” forum, such as participate in a discussion, share ideas for activities, find a partner to try out the tool, etc. The table of contents in Figure 2 illustrates the typical structure of one of the tutorials.

2

## Audio-conferencing / Audio-Konferenzen

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Audio-conferencing tools enable users to talk to (and sometimes see one another) in real time over the Internet. In this activity we will explore how these tools can be used to provide learners with opportunities to practise their speaking online in pairs or small groups.

Online Audio-Konferenzen sind Tools (Werkzeuge), die es Nutzern ermöglichen, über das Internet miteinander in Echtzeit zu reden (und manchmal sich auch zu sehen). In dieser Aktivität werden Sie sehen, wie Sie diese Tools nutzen können, um Ihren Lernenden zu ermöglichen, paarweise oder in Kleingruppen Sprechübungen online durchzuführen.

- Using audio-conferencing for language learning tasks - online activity
- Using audio-conferencing for language learning tasks - downloadable .pdf
- Audio-conferencing: explore and share
- Die Einsatz von Audio-Konferenzen für Aufgaben im Sprachenunterricht
- Audio-Konferenzen: Probieren Sie es aus und tauschen Sie sich mit anderen aus!

A shared practice:

JE05VideoConf.mov  
by agermain100

HTML version of tutorial in English

Downloadable pdf version in English

Explore and share forum in English

Downloadable pdf version of tutorial in German

Explore and share forum in German

Video of teacher trainer sharing an experience with using audio-conferencing

Figure 1: Resources available for audio-conferencing for language teaching

What can I do in this DOTS activity?	Where can I find the information? <i>(click on the link to go to the section)</i>
<b>Part 1</b>	
Find out what podcasts are.	A. <a href="#">What is a podcast?</a>
Think about some pedagogical reasons why I would want to use podcasts for my teaching.	B. <a href="#">Why would I want to use podcasts in my teaching?</a>
<b>Part 2</b>	
Learn about how to find and download podcasts.	C. <a href="#">How to find/download podcasts?</a>
Consider what I need to keep in mind when using podcasts in my teaching, explore podcasting yourself, and the different types of podcasts available.	D. <a href="#">Pedagogical considerations</a>
Find out about some practical suggestion for the classroom, and a sample activity.	E. <a href="#">Practical suggestions and sample activity</a>
<b>Part 3</b>	
Check my understanding using a quick and easy checklist.	F. <a href="#">Check your understanding</a>
Think back over what worked and what didn't work (in the DOTS activity and/or in my use of this tool).	G. <a href="#">Reflect!</a>
Check out what other teachers do with podcasts. Discuss and evaluate ideas and activities in a DOTS forum. Create additional tasks and share them with colleagues online.	H. <a href="#">Explore and share!</a>
Explore privacy issues in podcasting.	I. <a href="#">Protecting students' privacy.</a>
	J. <a href="#">References</a>

Figure 2: Table of contents for the activity on podcasting

### Future plans

The DOTS Project officially ended in December 2011 after the workspace was opened to the general public. Additional funding, however, has been obtained from ECML for Using open resources to develop online teaching skills: More DOTS, a two-year mediation project with the aim of disseminating and building on the work completed so far. Along with formally trained language professionals, this follow-up project will target individuals who teach languages informally or non-formally (e.g. educators of other subjects, educators in informal heritage language schools for children) as well as organizations





involved in teaching heritage and minority languages or in teaching majority languages to migrants. To support these target audiences, existing activities will be adapted to include explicit pedagogical foci for specific contexts. Also crucial to this second phase will be the creation of a self-sustaining community of practice to ensure that users participate in the activities, contribute new materials, and provide one another with the necessary support in order to successfully implement the use of online tools in their teaching.

The ECML has also agreed to fund additional “targeted support” activities for institutions and national agencies interested in using the expertise developed in the DOTS project. Specific workshops will be held in different European countries to pass on the training effects to language teachers, teacher trainers, and policy makers. Dissemination of project findings will also take place through conference presentations and publications, including research articles based on the DOTS project.

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