

# The Tutor's Role in a Language Course

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## Abstract

*The growing offer of e-learning courses developed in the last few years has imposed a deep reflection about the tutor's role, his tasks and the definition of his competences. All this has led, through a progressive reevaluation, to the final admission that the tutor's role cannot be disregarded. The stimulating debate that has arisen has helped to identify different tutor profiles. At an extreme end we find the "tutor" as a facilitator and one who answers for the coursekeeping but not necessarily an expert of the subject; at the opposite end the "mentor", who is responsible for the course and is an expert of the subject. Between the two ends we find an intermediate varieties due not only to the tutor's role but also to the context in which he acts. In the experience of an online course of Italian for Special Purposes, where the language is both the object of learning and the medium of the communicative exchanges with the learners, so having a social function, the roles of the tutor and the mentor come to overlap. To the tutor's traditional functions (organizational and social, to mention just two of many others) we must necessarily add the didactic function of supporting the acquisition of the linguistic contents: not only is the tutor a support to the teacher, he is the teacher himself. This coincidence has a number of consequences that modify the tutor's role and add other functions to the statutory required ones, meaning the competence of the language that is taught, the capability to manage an unbalanced relationship with the learners regarding the involved competences, since the learner himself is expert of the object of learning while the tutor is expert of the code that is the expression of that object. Removing the borders is the tutor's new task.*

## 1. Introduction

The debate, which at present continues to still be very stimulating, about the distinction of the different tutor profiles testifies to the growing awareness of the importance given to the online tutor's role. Various typologies of online tutor have been identified, all of them focusing his central role in e-learning. Particularly significant to the experience we are going to describe seem to be the distinctions referring to his competences, that give rise to his functions. For reasons of time, we will reduce the various differences corresponding to the different kinds of online tutor's profile to two macro-roles which are significant to our case, that is to say in the online course of Italian for Special Purposes that UniCredit Processes & Administration SpA (the company that develops and provides the accounting and administrative services for the banks of the UniCredit Group, from now on UPA), commissioned to the Università per Stranieri di Siena. The course was intended for the bank staff working in Bucarest, Romania. The two above mentioned macro-distinctions are between "mentor" and "tutor". The "mentor" is an expert on the subject, he is responsible for the course-keeping and for his competence as he is the point of reference for whatever concerns the subject. The "tutor" has no competence in the subject, his function is to guarantee the formative course-keeping, give constant support, maintain a tight relationship between the group and the single students and monitor the activities.

## 2. Coincidence of "tutor" and "mentor"

In the UPA course, the distinction between "tutor" and "mentor" and the respective different capacities was hard to keep on two separate levels. The difficulty was due to the co-presence of two factors linked together: on one hand the object of learning which was the language for special purposes, on the other hand the specific competence of the discipline that the students had. Two competences met in the didactic dynamics: the one of the subject owned by the students, but not by the tutor and the one of the language owned by the tutor but not by the students. The latter was the real object of learning. In this context we are not going to deal with the controversial question of the competences that a teacher of Italian as a second language for Special Purposes is considered to own; we will just notice the advantage which sprang from the co-presence of the two distinct competences in terms both of didactic activity and of the balance of the tutor's role and the students. In our experience, the tutor (we will use this term just for a matter of facility) made the most of the knowledge of the subject owned by the

students, supporting them in activities where their competence could be essential to the good results of a task (for example the implementation of a technical glossary) and limiting his actions to the linguistic area; this contributed to giving the language its real nature of a medium to express meanings and at the same time it helped the cooperative relationship between tutor and students. Also from a psychological and affective point of view it had positive effects on the students since they felt that their professional role and thus the social image they had of themselves was intact and furthermore they were given the chance to play a fundamental role in their learning process. In this sense, referring to S. Krashen [1], we can say that the emotional filter was kept low and a favourable learning atmosphere was created. So, that our tutor had to have competence in the subject meant in Italian language for special purposes, corresponding in this sense to the mentor's functions, but at the same time he also had to have all the tutor's competences in order to be able to accomplish the functions of scaffolding, of "maternage" (to mention Ardizzone and Rivoltella) [2], facilitator, communication monitor, group coordinator and learning object manager. The convergence of the two profiles of mentor and tutor has contributed to avoiding overlapping that can occur in situations where the two distinct roles are present at the same time. Furthermore, in two cases the tutors were also part of the team that had carried out the course plan. The fact that the whole tutor team belonged to the same institution facilitated a lot of interfacing with those who were responsible for the formative project, with whom the tutors had shared other previous professional experiences. It also helped the relationship among the tutors themselves in managing inter-group activities such as the Blog, which required the participation of all the groups, and general collaboration on virtual class management. In order to further facilitate this tutors' exchange, an exclusive access forum was created, where the tutors could share opinions and problems.

### **3. Tutor's activities**

In his double role of tutor and mentor, the tutor has concentrated his activities on various levels of action:

- facilitate and encourage the students' mastery of their learning process
- facilitate single students' introduction in the virtual groups and thus in the collective experience
- stimulate the students' common knowledge (emphasizing their common knowledge of the subject)
- encourage group debates
- monitor group's dynamics
- support (also emotionally) the students' efforts during their learning process, providing them spur and suggestions
- monitor activity and testing proceeding
- provide support in discipline contents

The community creation and support has been the main goal in which the tutor has focused a great part of his activity, since it was the mainstay of our online course philosophy, that was based on the adherence to the learning theory of constructivism, where the aspects of cooperation and negotiation within the group of peers and within the direct relationship with the tutor are among the fundamental assumptions [3]. Sharing knowledge, placing it at the learners' disposal in order to generate new knowledge, is in general a very powerful tool, but it becomes particularly important in e-learning where besides this function, cooperation takes the value of aggregative force contributing in a decisive way to the creation of the community. In order to accomplish this goal the tutor reacted using different tools. First of all, through shared writing activities present in all the ten course units. These activities required the groups to come up with a common text that had to be the result of the learners' cooperation. The texts were generally e-mails and reports, two kinds of text that the learners usually had to produce in their everyday professional activity. The realization occurred in two distinct phases and in two distinct working areas of the platform. The first phase was dedicated to text planning and occurred in a specifically tailored forum. Here the students negotiated the text structure, its contents and the linguistic forms that could better express them. The second phase occurred in Wiki, where the learners would write their contributions, modify the ones already produced and propose new ones, choosing the most effective one to accomplish the goal each time, until the final version was reached. During the two phases, the tutor followed the activity development and intervened in case of conflict, gave advice and linguistic support. Another tool that was used was the Glossary: in every unit each group was assigned two technical words of which they had to write the meaning. In this case too, negotiation occurred in a specifically tailored forum; the tutor followed the negotiation process and once the final version was written he gave advice about the best linguistic performance to be adopted for the specific communicative purpose; his intervention concerned the correction of language errors. After that the correct final versions were placed by the tutor himself in the common Glossary where all the items produced by the ten groups were to be found. Monitoring the students' learning process required great care since the time limits suggested for accomplishing the activities in the learning objects were very tight. Through the forum, dedicated to the possible problems concerning didactic matters that the students could meet, the tutor was able to fulfil his facilitator function taking care of every single student, answering his questions, supplying stimulus and advice for further learning activities and personal training according to the single students' needs, thus establishing a one-to-one relationship with the students.

A Blog was purposely created to involve the students in discussions about themes related to economical topics: they never dealt with technical banking matters, rather concerned social-economical themes arising from topical subjects that could stir up the students' motivation to participate. From a didactic point of view, the Blog was also very important for the tutor for at least three reasons: first because the learners' performances constituted a feedback of their learning progress; second because at the same time it was a learning tool; third because, thanks to the conversational nature about general themes, it was a useful way to learn more about the students and their way of interacting, so getting to enlarge the knowledge of their profile.

The activities of the learning units were balanced in such a way to promote:

- the learners' autonomy, referring to time and procedure of task execution: automatic correction activities, external links for further practice, activities to be downloaded and carried out in a period of time and a place different from the working place
- the contact with the tutor through free writing activities to be carried out individually and then supervised by the tutor

A central part of the tutor's work consisted in monitoring the participation to the shared activities, the learning process through the activities individually supervised, the realization of the Glossary, the testing and all the other activities. The aim was to guarantee the tutor's reliable presence in order to ensure the students they were not alone and, at the same time, ensure discreet interventions: the tutor was to be perceived as a support in the learning process, supplying the necessary scaffolding and slowly fading to give the students space for an autonomous working out of knowledge [4].

We can say that, in our case, the tutor's function coincided with what De Sanctis [5] calls "didactic mediator", who deals with three functional areas:

- organizational function: facilitating the participation to the course;
- social function: facilitating socialization and communication
- didactic function: supporting the contents acquisition

#### **4. Critical aspects in the course management**

Each tutor was in charge of two study groups (each group consisted of 10 learners). The major difficulty the tutors had to face regarded the group management for the reasons we are going to illustrate.

Our groups were in a sense anomalous compared to standard e-learning groups because the learners were physically in the same place (sometimes even in the same office) and so the knew each other quite well. This could have been a double edged sword to have been handled very carefully. We could imagine that, on one side this sort of anomaly would facilitate the creation of a sense of community thanks to the fact that our students were already sharing work, on the other the fact that the people knew each other could invalidate motivation in cooperative activities because of the lack of the element of discovery and unknown that often acts as a stimulus. As a matter of fact the problems the tutor faced concerned essentially the creation of a community. The fact of being physically in the same place strongly reduced the virtual aspect of the group and the virtuality passed above all through the online activities and the relationship with the tutor.

A further problem concerned two elements that coincided: the first one was related to the short duration of the course, that was not completely suitable to e-learning. The second one was related to the students' commitment to accomplish a great part of the activities during their working time, being also pressed by urgent engagements that could not always be postponed. All this generated a trend to privilege individual activities rather than cooperative activities even though the latter ones did not require a simultaneous presence being asynchronous; but of course individual activities are more economical in a time perspective. On the contrary, activities that require group cooperation need more time before getting to their complete fulfilment. In this sense, the tutor concentrated his efforts to stimulate and awaken the students to the value and effectiveness of sharing time to do common activities, both in a holistic sense of learning and as interaction tools that are generally important in most cases but seem to be fundamental in a language course, where interaction is of basic importance. Furthermore, in our case interaction happened to be in the written form and through asynchronous activities: this helped reflection and control on the formal aspect of language performances that is absent both in real time face to face interaction and in synchronous written interactive performances. The activities aimed at the development of those abilities that mostly responded to the students' real needs, that is written comprehension and production and oral comprehension. Although the participation to community activities was not completely fulfilled, the questionnaires show that the students appreciated the way of sharing work and attributed a high score to it in terms of benefits in learning.

Another peculiarity of our group, compared to the usual online community was the personal and professional network which linked the learners and could have had an influence on community management. The tutor had to make great efforts to understand and monitor group dynamics since the group was, in a certain way, already formed: he did not start from the "neutral" relationships of a new group, monitoring them from the very beginning of contact, on the contrary, internal dynamics due to professional roles and hierarchies. Therefore the tutor's had to take into consideration that pre-existent conditions could have had an influence on learners' interaction. This situation confirms the results of the observation of the relationship inside the group and one-to-one between the tutor and the single students: the latter one was preferred to the former one.

A final consideration concerns the learners' motivation in approaching the course. As a matter of fact it had a professional aim, since Italian was fundamental in interacting with the Italian headquarters and branch offices, but it also represented an additional skill from the individual general education point of view. The tutor worked very deeply on it: at the didactic level he tried to identify personalized paths for the learners through reinforcement activities, further practice, advice etc, at the emotional level trying to establish a personal contact above all through e-mail, which could in a way be felt as private relationships.

## 5. Conclusions

The tutor/mentor formula used on our course proved to be successful for the fulfilment of the learning objectives since it guaranteed, amongst other things, immediate responses to the language problems that would arise, which was particularly important considering the short course length. It was the time factor in particular that represented one of the major critical points and that has to be modified in future editions of the course; adapting it to the physically longer time frames of e-learning. In our opinion, this would also have a positive influence on the other critical point we have mentioned, that is to say the creation of a community, since the tutor could more easily work out his scaffolding operation and improve those activities that help cooperation among peers.

## References

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