

Analysing E-tutoring Strategies to Foster Pre-service Language Teachers' Reflective Practice in the First Stages of Building an E-portfolio

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Abstract This study aims to analyse the tutoring strategies that three e-tutors employed in online written interactions with two of their corresponding pre-service teachers in the first stages of the development of their e-portfolio within a master's degree in online language teaching. Building on the data collected from thirty-four documents, which include the written drafts of the initial document of their e-portfolios (the Starting Point), the final versions of this document and their email exchanges, and the study identifies six types of discursive-pedagogical strategies: Suggesting; Inquiring for reflection; Providing information and instructions; Correcting; Giving positive feedback; and Using affective moves. This article provides examples of each strategy, which illustrate the diverse ways in which the e-tutors tried to foster the pre-service language teachers' reflection. The results are relevant for a deeper understanding of the effective processes involved in e-tutoring and the development of reflective practice in the creation of an e-portfolio.

Keywords E-tutoring, E-portfolio, Reflective Practice, Language Teacher Education, Online Learning

1. Introduction

Academic interest in analysing online teaching practices in order to optimise online students' learning has grown significantly in recent years due to the increasing demand for online courses [1]. It is thus paramount to investigate the pedagogical processes involved in the e-tutoring on these courses so as to make online learning meaningful and instructionally effective.

In the context of teacher education, reflective practice (RP) is a pedagogical approach, which promotes and develops fundamental thinking processes for teachers.

There are a wide range of studies on how to implement this approach in such a context [2, 3, 4], on how reflection is promoted in different programmes [5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10], and on the strategies utilised by teacher educators in promoting it [7, 11]. Nevertheless, there is no explicit agreement on the way in which reflection should be promoted to trainee teachers in an educational context [12]. In addition to this, Mauri *et al.* [12] also highlight the discussion in the existing literature about the tutor's type of intervention and the role of their assistance in promoting more complex levels of reflection. Hence, in a bid to identify which strategies prove most useful in promoting the pre-service teacher's own reflection, this study analyses the e-tutoring strategies used to foster pre-service language teachers' RP in the first stage of creating an electronic portfolio (e-portfolio) in a master's language teacher education programme.

Although there is a predominance of written forms of reflection [7], seen in varied approaches such as narratives, journals, and portfolios, the e-portfolio opens up multiple formats for documenting the reflective process [13] such as images, videos, mind maps or infographics, which in turn enhance to a certain extent the explicitness of reflection [14]. Therefore, promoting the effective use of digital formats with images, hyperlinks and videos -among other elements- through the e-portfolio could possibly prevent some problems commonly encountered when using written forms of reflection. As Mann & Walsh [7] point out, "a common problem with written forms of RP is that the focus of attention becomes the actual writing itself, or rather the pro-forma, checklist or whatever is used as a stimulus to reflection" (p. 18). They state that practitioners -in the present context, pre-service teachers- become concerned above all with completing the reflective task in itself, and that, "at its worst this can result in inauthentic reflection [15] and even 'faking it' [16]" (p. 18).

To take full advantage of the potential benefits of the

e-portfolio, emphasis should be put on the necessity of providing the e-tutor with a set of guidelines to help foster students' reflection on their own learning process in an online educational context. "It cannot be taken for granted that instructors -let alone learners- comprehend the key processes involved in the creation of learning portfolios" [17, p. 22]. This study attempts to elucidate e-tutoring strategies so as to build those guidelines for best practices of online teaching. Therefore, this study has the following aims: to identify the e-tutoring strategies displayed by the e-tutors at a pedagogical-discursive level, and to determine how students react to these strategies when they are utilised by the e-tutors in the creation of the first document (Starting Point - SP) to be included in their e-portfolios.

1.1. Reflective Practice in Pre-service Teacher Education

Pre-service teacher education based on reflective practice (RP) consists in reflecting on learning processes, as well as observing, analysing and reflecting upon teaching practices so as to become more effective, conscientious teachers [18, 19, 20, 21, 22].

There is a wide range of literature on RP in the context of pre-service teacher education [19, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31], which focuses on different aspects of RP in this context, such as levels of reflection, contexts, models and tools, but the point of common agreement is that if student teachers engage in some form of RP from the start of the teacher education programme then they will be trained to self-regulate their learning and will be more aware of their own competences than they would otherwise be. Recognising adroitly the import of this consensus, Mann & Walsh [7] note that despite the growing number of empirical studies of RP there remains a need to show how RP "can be and needs to be operationalized in systematic ways [32]" (p. 5). The same authors [7] are similarly perceptive in their contention that this approach should "promote understanding and awareness and focus less on problem-solving", and that it "needs to cope with the demands of assessment but not [be] determined by it" (p. 70).

Teacher educators must play an active role in ensuring that their student teachers have opportunities to develop their reflective practices [21, 33] and must also assist them in making their reflection explicit in an effective way. Some student teachers have difficulties in expressing their reflections as nobody has previously asked them to do so in a conscientious, structured and systematic way. Systematic reflection does not come about by itself [34, 35], but rather requires support in the form of supervisory activities [36, cited in 11, p. 170].

In teacher education programmes, the support given to trainee teachers by teacher educators is ideally a balance of challenging and supporting, and "the amount of scaffolded support given will depend very much on the perceived evaluation by the 'expert' of what is needed by the 'novice'"

[7, p. 13].

"As with any effective student-centred learning, development and progression in Initial Teacher Education is based on achieving the right balance between support [...] and challenge, to move the student teacher forward in their thinking or practice" [37, p. 37].

Farrell [38] states that in pre-service education contexts -such as that of this study- it is important to pay attention to the potential for reflection and sharing of experience to 'bridge the gap' between training input and the realities of classroom teaching. In addition to the necessity of bridging the gap between theory and practice [39], as Rivers, Richardson and Price [40] state, it is important to remember that "despite the apparent advantages for teachers [of promoting] reflective skills, it is unreasonable to assume that all teachers will have the same approaches to and understandings of reflection". This statement is even more relevant when it comes to promoting reflection through different reflective tools and contexts, as in e-learning environments. The results of various studies on RP in teacher education surmise that the development of RP in these programmes favours the creation of links between the attributes that define quality teaching to form an increasingly complex mental schema on the part of trainee teachers [41].

In achieving the aim of promoting RP in teacher education programmes and that of bridging the gap between the theory and the practice, the figure of a tutor or a mentor becomes essential. As Frick, Carl and Beets [42] remark, "reflection is indeed a process where students learn about the self in context and that mentoring can act as a catalyst to enhance this learning process" (p. 434).

1.2. E-tutoring and E-mentoring Styles and Strategies

There is an expanding body of research regarding different aspects of electronic mentoring (e-mentoring) or online mentoring [43, 44, 45, 46, 47], e-moderating [48, 49] and e-tutoring [50], such as student teachers' online discussions and the forms of e-mentoring or e-tutoring used [50, 51] and the strategies adopted by the e-mentors or e-tutors in facilitating these discussions [52]; the strategies for e-mentoring relationships [43, 44]; the intended aims of mentoring in a group-based online environment [45]; and how e-mentoring can strengthen pedagogical performances [47]. Studies within this context investigate different forms of digital communication (email, videoconferences, etc.) carried out by means of different types of interaction (one-to-one or one-to-many).

In Angeli, Valanides & Bonk's study [51] on student teachers' online discussions, they present twelve different forms of e-mentoring based on Bonk and Kim's study, [53] organized into three categories: low-level mentoring; high-level mentoring; and management. Their results show that questioning was the most frequent form of mentoring (36%), followed by general advice/scaffolding (31%).

Another 12% of mentors' postings represented social acknowledgement, 11% feedback, and 8% direct instruction (p. 38). Gareis and Nussbaum-Beach [45], who also adapted Bonk and Kim's forms of mentor communication, developed the following e-mentor functions: support/confirmation; guided advice; modeling; seeking clarification/direct questioning; prompting reflection; and professional growth. They found the following: Modeling (a function the authors defined as a mentor describing his or her own experience or thinking but not giving direct advice, answers, or interpretations of a given situation) proved to be the most frequent purpose of mentor posts (63%), followed by offering guided advice (38%), questioning (12%) and prompting reflection (11%). Sinclair [44] states that the two most frequent mentoring roles undertaken by the mentor were providing feedback to students (19.4% of comments made) and challenging them, generally by posing questions (17.7% of comments). Meanwhile, Guldberg and Pilkington's study [50] highlights the importance of creating a safe environment for students by focusing on the types of questions asked at different stages of a course. These results are in line with Salmon's five stage model [48], as the authors point out the necessity of asking "questions which encourage engagements on a social, personal and reflective level at early stages but then gradually introduce more cognitive demand as students' progress through the course" [50, p. 69].

Regarding the analysis of mentoring relationships, Bierema & Merriam [43] indicate that mutual respect, trust, and comfort are essential components of the e-mentoring relationship (p. 213), findings, which are in agreement with those of Badilla & Parra [47].

Angeli, Valanides & Bonk [51], discussing the issue of 'low-level' thinking and poor interaction in online environments, mention the importance of well-designed mentoring strategies to promote quality interaction. The results of their study showed that mentors' postings were limited and restricted to using only low-level questions, a result that they link to mentors not being adequately trained to model critical-thinking skills in an online environment. Salmon [48] also emphasizes the importance of training tutors and mentors (or e-moderators) to moderate in an effective way the process of knowledge construction.

In the context of oral interaction there are a great number of studies concerning teacher educators' roles and strategies or skills displayed through dialogues in face-to-face interaction, as shown in Hennissen *et al.* [11] and other more recent studies [2, 31, 54, 55, 56, 57, 58, 59, 60, 61]. The results of these studies, although drawn from oral interaction contexts, can nevertheless contribute to the process of gaining a deeper understanding of the roles and strategies displayed in other formats of tutoring and mentoring interactions.

As observed by Hennissen *et al.* [11], the distinction between a directive and a non-directive style is well-known.

"Using the directive style a mentor teacher tells the prospective teacher what to do, assesses, corrects, recites and informs" (p. 174). Less directive styles are described as 'reflective' and 'cooperative' [11] or 'inquiring' [62]. From the 26 selected studies, Hennissen *et al.* [11] identify that the characteristics of directive supervisory skills are: assessing, appraising, instructing, confirming, expressing one's own opinion, offering strategies and giving feedback; and the non-directive supervisory skills include the following: asking questions, guiding to develop alternatives, reacting empathetically, summarising and listening actively (p. 174). The authors point out that a frequent supervisory skill in mentoring dialogues is advising (p. 175) and that mentor teachers should be able to play various roles in dialogues in order to be flexible in their approaches (p. 180).

Regarding the promotion of RP in teacher education programmes which focus on students' reflection using portfolios or e-portfolios, studies such as that of Pueyo [63] on trainee teachers' self-regulating processes in the elaboration of e-portfolios give some insight. In a case study on the e-tutoring of a pre-service teacher's e-portfolio, the author identifies four types of discursive assistance through which the tutor mediates the pedagogical assistance to promote the pre-service teacher's reflection processes in the elaboration of e-portfolio: *explicative*, *inquiring*, *instructional* and *sanctioning*. The results show that the two predominant discourse types are the instructional (27 occurrences) and the inquiring (26 occurrences), compared to the explicative (17 occurrences) and the sanctioning (3 occurrences) (p. 343). These results show that the e-tutor's role is a combination of a directive and an inquiring style. Concerning the pre-service teacher's reaction to the e-tutor's assistance, Pueyo [63] indicates, among other things, that the pre-service teacher adopts a more reflective approach, which focuses on her training processes and professional development and is less based on exposition and knowledge demonstration.

In the following section, the e-portfolio's potential as a tool for enhancing the pre-service teachers' learning process is introduced.

1.3. E-portfolio for Teacher Education

Electronic Portfolios are excellent tools for pre-service teacher education [64] as they help student teachers self-regulate their learning by prompting them to set learning goals, to make their learning explicit online, and to reflect upon selected samples of evidence that show progress towards these goals. Also, "ePortfolios afford structured time and space for learners to understand and voice their experiences with guidance from their instructors" [65].

E-portfolios have definite advantages over paper-based portfolios [17] as they imply a new concept of portfolio beyond a simple electronic container in which to include

digital artifacts in a range of media (audio, video, graphics, and text) [13]. E-portfolios exploit the multimodality feature of digital texts and the hypertext structure, which facilitates navigation through the material. The dynamic nature of e-portfolios is clearly seen in how easy it is to edit their content and to exchange artifacts, or to include different ones in order to show evolution over time. Furthermore, they can be made easily accessible to tutors and peers, assisting in the regular provision of feedback, which in turn helps students to improve their explicit reflection on their learning processes. Boulton and Hramiak [66] use the term 'e-flection' to emphasize the essence of the e-portfolio, which facilitates trainee teachers in seeing the constantly evolving nature of the learning process in an online environment.

In the initial process of creating e-portfolios students should select, from a variety of platforms, the one that best suits their needs and goals. Blogs are commonly utilised digital environments in teacher education programmes [67, 68, 69, 70, 71] as they "foster narration, RP and the expression of identities" [72]; different web-based tools are selected to create portfolios on websites [73, 74]; and some programmes opt for specific e-portfolio web-based systems such as Mahara [75], or even Facebook [76]. Although technically the chosen format determines the way students present their evidence and artifacts, what matters is not the digital environment selected but the students' creative process and RP in constructing an e-portfolio.

"E-portfolio development encourages students' 'sense of self' through a process of skills-uptake such as organisation, collecting and classifying of evidence; utilization of tools and reflection *on*, and *in*, discipline specific knowledge, learning and tasks; higher order thinking such as synthesis and evaluation of learning" [77].

Furthermore, e-portfolios open up the opportunity for teacher trainers not only to enhance trainee teachers' reflective thinking but also to prepare them to develop their digital literacy for their future work in this constantly changing technological society.

2. Methodology

2.1. Participants

This study has been carried out within the Master's degree in Spanish Language Teacher Education at the *Centro Universitario Internacional de Barcelona* (UNIBA), an affiliated centre of the University of Barcelona, which offers different online undergraduate and postgraduate studies. The programme offers 90 ECTS and takes place over the course of three semesters. The pre-service teachers enrolled have an average age of 36, the majority of them are women, and they reside in different countries around the world - primarily Spain, Colombia

and the USA. From the start and throughout the entire programme the pre-service teachers are asked to put together an e-portfolio, an essential requirement for the completion of this postgraduate degree. The pre-service teachers are randomly assigned to the e-tutors by the programme coordinator at the beginning of the programme and these e-tutors accompany the pre-service teachers throughout it.

Three e-tutors were selected at the initial stage of their e-tutoring experience within the master's over the academic years 2015-2017. They are female teachers who have been awarded a MEd, without any specific training as online tutors, although with an average of 12 years' experience in teaching Spanish as a Foreign Language. Respectively, two pre-service teachers for each e-tutor were selected, thus three e-tutors and six pre-service teachers (5 female and 1 male) form the cohort of this study. This study applied a purposive sampling according to the following specific characteristics:

- The e-tutors were selected based on the similar way they approached their tutoring, using the following criteria: a) they were novices in e-tutoring e-portfolios, b) they included comments in the text in all SP drafts, c) they gave some feedback by email, and d) they also revised the final text including feedback.
- For the pre-service teachers' selection, the following criteria were used: (a) their blogs were public at the moment of the study and (b) they had a minimum of two drafts of their SP. This last requirement happens to meet requirement b) in the selection of tutors (see paragraph above).

None of the pre-service teachers had prior experience of constructing portfolios or e-portfolios, and they had varying levels of digital literacy skills.

In the first stages of the programme, the e-tutors get in contact with their assigned pre-service teachers and start the first draft of the SP. This is the moment of the process from which the data for this study has been collected.

2.2. Data Collection

The e-portfolio consists of the following documents:

- The Starting Point, a reflective snapshot of pre-service teachers, put together at the beginning of the programme,
- a compilation of five samples of pre-service teachers' work that evidences their progress, together with a reflection that provides the reasons why these samples are meaningful in relation to their learning process, and
- a final reflection which serves to close the portfolio, incorporating a future action plan which will start a new reflective process.

The pre-service teachers have to start creating an e-portfolio using a blog or website with the SP commenting on: (a) their initial beliefs and mental representations, (b)

their training needs and (c) expectations regarding the master's programme. To cover the three different areas, a series of suggested key questions are provided to guide them in the creation of the SP. The pre-service teachers are asked to send the first draft to their e-tutors, so that they can give them feedback in the process of creating the final version of the SP, for which they have two weeks.

For their part, e-tutors have an introductory booklet on basic e-tutoring guidelines regarding the e-portfolios, covering logistical instructions and some general e-tutoring advice. As for the creation of the SP, given that it is the first document the e-tutor receives, some directions are provided regarding the identification of pre-service teachers whose Spanish academic writing skills fall short of the required level, along with steps to be taken in such cases.

Data was collected from the written interaction which took place during the creation of the SP (the first document of the e-portfolio) between the three e-tutors and two (per e-tutor; six in total) of the corresponding pre-service teachers they were responsible for tutoring. These documents included the pre-service teachers' written drafts with the e-tutors' feedback, their email exchanges (see numbers in table 1) and the six final versions of the SP, one for each pre-service teacher.

Table 1. Number of documents as a result of e-tutoring interaction

e-Tutors		DOCUMENTS		Pre-service teachers	
		drafts	emails		
A	⇒	2	3	⇐ ⇐	Pst1A Pst2A
	⇒	2	3		
M	⇒	2	1	⇐ ⇐	Pst1M Pst2M
	⇒	2	2		
P	⇒	3	2	⇐ ⇐	Pst1P Pst2P
	⇒	3 (online)	3		
TOTAL		14	14		

2.3. Data Analysis

A qualitative research approach was adopted for this study in order to identify the e-tutor's discursive-pedagogical strategies and the pre-service teacher's reactions from the data, using the following research procedure:

1. The researchers based their initial categorisation on previous work regarding the use of discursive-pedagogical strategies in fostering explicit reflection on e-portfolios [78, 63].

2. They then carried out a joint analysis of the data collected from one of the pre-service teachers. As a result of this analysis, the categorisation was then redesigned and the discursive-pedagogical strategies were grouped into four e-tutoring functions (see 3.2).
3. The protocol for codifying the discursive-pedagogical strategies performed by the three e-tutors was based on a procedure whose aim was to achieve inter-rater agreement and thus to ensure a higher reliability. Both researchers assigned codes to the data independently and compared their results, with any disagreements being discussed jointly.
4. Finally, the reactions of the pre-service teachers were identified in connection with the corresponding e-tutors' strategies so as to assess the effectiveness of the e-tutoring strategies.

3. Results

3.1. E-tutoring Strategies

The e-tutoring strategies identified in the analysis of the interactions between the e-tutors and the corresponding pre-service teachers in the thirty-four documents can be seen in Table 2, together with how often they occurred and a definition for each strategy.

The number of occurrences informs us of the frequency in the use of certain strategies, allowing us to observe whether some are predominant over others. As seen in Table 2, the most frequent strategy is *Correcting*, specifically, *Explicit corrections*, which are related to linguistic correctness. These figures are as high as they are due to the fact that this programme is directed at language teachers and, as such, it is essential that they have a good level of linguistic competence. However, this strategy, compared with the other strategies identified, is somewhat tangential in terms of promoting reflection.

Providing information and instructions and *Suggesting* are the next two most recurrent strategies, revealing a more directive role [11] played by the e-tutors. *Giving positive feedback* has a similar number of occurrences, indicating that e-tutors provide an open, motivating and pleasant atmosphere. In addition, the strategies that e-tutors used in making reflection explicit occurred in isolation or in combination with others, either concurrently or merged. In fact, results show that the *Using affective moves* strategy usually co-occurs with other strategies, especially in the case of more directive strategies (see e.g. 1, 5, 8 and 10 below). Finally, the non-directive strategy of *Inquiring for reflection* is the least frequently occurring. From the data, **questions** to prompt reflection were displayed in a variety of strategies that not only corresponded to specific and general inquiring but also to indirect suggestions.

Table 2. E-tutoring strategies identified in the data

Discursive-pedagogical strategies	Definitions
Suggesting [n=40]	Providing options for actions or alternative types of reflections, advising. Direct [n=28]: an explicit suggestion to be introduced in the subsequent draft. Indirect [n=12]: a comment that can be implicitly interpreted as a suggestion.
Inquiring for reflection [n=9]	Asking questions in order to prompt the pre-service teachers to reflect on their learning process or to make their reflections explicit. Specific [n=5]: referring to something previously mentioned. General [n=4]: not referring to anything previously mentioned or included in the text.
Providing information and instructions [n=49]	Informing pre-service teachers regarding general aspects concerning the creation of the SP, or answering their questions on such matters. This strategy also includes giving or reiterating instructions for creating the SP.
Correcting [n=87]	Making corrections when an error or inappropriate content is identified. Explicit [n=72]: indicating specifically which error was made. Implicit [n=15]: general comments on errors without specifically identifying them.
Giving positive feedback [n=41]	Providing positive appraisal.
Using affective moves [n=68]	Creating a pleasant atmosphere based on mutual trust and acceptance. There are several strategies within the affective dimension: Hedging: face-saving strategies. "A hedge is taken to be any linguistic device whose pragmatic purpose is to soften or mitigate a piece of spoken or written discourse in an attempt to reduce potential threats to face" [79, p. 111]. Paralinguistic signs such as emoticons, font and color options, capitalization, and the use of special characters or symbols. Social conventions: basic rules of interaction, such as greetings and netiquette, and setting up the ground rules of the tutoring relationship. Motivational expressions to encourage students' good work.

There are a range of different discursive approaches the e-tutors took when **making suggestions** to pre-service teachers which involved different strategies:

a) Direct suggestion with initial hedging: Some suggestions are explicit in order to facilitate the pre-service teachers in turning their attention towards the actual catalysts of reflection:

Example 1

Pst1P: As I am from Barcelona, I have always spoken and written in Catalan in the same way that I do in Castilian.

*P: **Perhaps it would be interesting to comment here**¹ on what it has been like to grow up in a bilingual environment and what this allows you to bring to your language teaching.*

b) Direct suggestion and specific direct inquiring: The e-tutor suggests that the pre-service teacher explain further an idea that has previously been laid out, together with a question that reinforces said suggestion:

Example 2

Pst1A: It was here that I found that I needed to look for the necessary tools to be able to do my work as a teacher.

*A: As well as what you mention about the need for a committed attitude on the part of the teacher, you also make reference to the fact that the teacher needs specific tools. **Explain this aspect a little more: what exactly are these tools***

c) Indirect suggestion: On other occasions, suggestions are implicitly stated in order to make pre-service teachers aware of issues upon which to reflect:

Example 3

Pst2A: Being a teacher in secondary education has been a challenge for me. I mean, as we know, most of us start work lacking pedagogical skills, this lack being a factor which limits our work in the classroom. We stick to repeating traditional methods and from here stems my need to do more preparation.

*A: [...] **The tone of this section is somewhat pessimistic in how you present yourself.***

d) Indirect suggestion with initial hedging: To aid the pre-service teacher in taking advantage of the full potential of the digital nature of the e-portfolio some indirect suggestions are also introduced by an initial comment with a hedging effect:

Example 4

"I see that there is only one image, a very suggestive one, of the feet in the mud, which I suppose has to do with the

¹ Bold typeface is used to indicate the discursive-pedagogical strategies.

importance you give to the body, emotions, etc. I don't know if you can perhaps make a little comment in the same place to introduce the blog so that we see a connection with the image ..." (email sent to Pst1M from e-tutor M)

e) Indirect and direct suggestions: Surprisingly, in various instances both suggestions are found concurrently. Interestingly enough, with this combination e-tutors move from indirect to direct, resulting in a direct suggestion with a hedging effect, similar to approach **a)** above:

Example 5

Pst1A: From my perspective as a foreign language teacher, I really believe that more than providers of knowledge we are providers of opportunities.

A: It's a pity that you don't develop this idea specifically in terms of what those opportunities mean when we talk about learning foreign languages. I would like you to develop this point a little more.

Furthermore, there are other occasions on which suggestions are made following the use of other discursive strategies dealt with in the discussion below.

Another relevant strategy which has been widely studied in RP (see 1.2) is **inquiring**, which prompts pre-service teachers' reflection or helps them to make their reflections explicit.

a) General inquiry: Questions within this category may induce a pre-service teacher to deepen, in a meaningful way, an idea which they have previously outlined:

Example 6

Pst2A: I hope to deepen my knowledge and train as a teacher in this new field.

A: As a teacher, what type of teacher is it you feel you are drawn towards being? What type of teacher would you like to build yourself up into?

b) Specific inquiry: In this example, the e-tutor seems to ensure that the selected image has a meaningful relation with the student's identity as a teacher, by means of referring to the evocative power of images as intensifiers for metacognitive reflection. Thus, in this instance the tutor does not take anything for granted and searches for an opportunity both to prompt the student to use the multimodal potential of the digital text in an effective way and, consequently, to make the pre-service teacher aware of the importance of not taking any multimodal element for granted:

Example 7

"But perhaps with the autumnal leaves you are trying to reflect something about your vision of teaching languages or about your image of yourself as a teacher. Is that right?" (comment on an image in the Pst2A blog by email from tutor A)

c) General inquiry and direct suggestion with hedging: this strategy follows the same purpose as in Example 2 in the 'suggestion' section above, but in this

instance the tutor inverts the order in such a way that her inquiry is reinforced by the suggestion, and uses the conditional tense to mitigate the directness of both strategies utilised:

Example 8

Pst1P: [...] and to never forget the importance of the expectations that the teacher places on the students.

P: Could you clarify a little what you're referring to here? You could expand on it briefly so that we can see more clearly what you want to say.

Another strategy often used by e-tutors is **Providing information and instructions** either to answer questions posed by the pre-service teachers or to inform them about general aspects concerning the creation of the SP.

a) Providing information and instructions: The e-tutor reminds the pre-service teacher about the necessity of correcting the text and meeting the deadlines:

Example 9

A: The text must be totally revised and correct from a normative standpoint so that it can be evaluated. For this reason, I ask that you update your Starting Point with the pertinent corrections before next Monday, December 4. Once you have made all the corrections and the text is totally correct, again send me an email with the link to access the updated version of your Starting Point.

b) Providing information and instructions + social conventions: The e-tutor is setting up the ground rules of the e-tutoring relationship:

Example 10

P: As you will see, I have replied to you as soon as I have been able to, to help you have everything on time, but I hope you understand that it may not always be this way, because the time available to give feedback will be closely related to the timeliness with which you send me the work.

c) Providing information and instructions + indirect suggestion: With this strategy the e-tutor first informs the pre-service teacher of what is expected in the creation of the e-portfolio and then suggests what specific aspects they could reflect upon:

Example 11

A: With this portfolio, what we are looking for is that you start a process of reflection about the learning that you are going to do in the master's. This reflection is always personal and individual. As such, it is more interesting to know which aspects you as a teacher consider most important and why, according to your perspective on language teaching and your prior experiences.

A frequent strategy e-tutors use is **correcting** different aspects of linguistic and academic writing acceptability, or content appropriateness. Within this strategy two approaches have been identified:

a) Explicit correction:

Linguistic correction:

Example 12

*A: **Beginning a sentence with an infinitive like this without using a colon (:)** is not correct. Use connectors to join these two sentences. For example: Another relevant point was.../ Likewise, ... etc.*

On other occasions, e-tutors only highlight the errors in the text, normally typos, punctuation signs or diacritical marks pre-service teachers may have omitted or misplaced.

Academic writing acceptability:

Example 13

*P: **Regarding the bibliographical references, look closely at the following aspects:** Coll is the first surname and the one that usually appears in the reference, and the name is written with the initial in capital letters followed by a full stop and the year of the publication in parentheses: Coll, C. (year), etc. **Keep in mind that the way in which the references appear will depend on the rules you follow, but in any case, there must be consistency in use.***

Content appropriateness:

Example 14

*P: **Regarding the section on training, the idea is not to lay out all the formative experience as if it were a curriculum, but rather to reflect on what you believe those prior formative experiences allow you to bring (or not) to this new one, that of the master's.***

b) Implicit correction:

Example 15

*The exchange of teaching practices with other colleagues, good tutoring in certain cases and the empathy that the teaching activity itself involves have allowed me to make sense of what I do and to consider the need to unlearn some practices that I have not been assertive in incorporating through learning how to do it well. **SOMETHING IS NOT RIGHT WITH THIS SENTENCE.** (e-Tutor M writes the feedback comment next to the pre-service teacher's text in her SP using paralinguistic signs: red text and capital letters)*

Furthermore, e-tutors also used strategies to provide **positive feedback** to encourage the pre-service teachers in the creation of their SP. Below are three examples of this strategy. In the first example, typical motivational expressions are not found, but the e-tutor still recognises the relevance of the content provided; in the second and third examples, though, such motivational expressions are present. Also, in Example 18 the e-tutor includes a paralinguistic sign (a smiley emoticon) as an effective strategy.

Example 16

*M: **You attach great importance to the emotional aspect, and to the body, which are greatly neglected elements in teaching in general and which are becoming***

***increasingly important.** Everything you say about where you come from connects with your vision of education and learning.*

Example 17

*A: **There is one aspect which really stands out to me, which is the strategic use that you make of bold type to highlight key ideas: this technique is very much characteristic of linguistic discourse in the blog format and is totally appropriate and effective in this communicative context.***

Example 18

*P: Hi R., **perfect!** I'm very glad to hear it, this means that we are in tune :-)*

3.2. Grouping of Strategies

After identifying these discursive strategies, researchers put them into groups, focusing on the pedagogical functions in terms of the e-tutoring. Four groups were identified:

1. Fostering explicit reflection: strategies that either promote the explicitness of the reflection or help the pre-service teachers to delve into the reflection process (see Example 19 below and/or 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 11, 16 above).

Example 19

*P: In the 'Experience' section, when you've finished laying out the information, **it would be nice if you succinctly outlined what you think you will take forward from it into this new stage.***

2. Building the tutoring relationship: strategies that foster a series of affective facets that in turn help to construct a pleasant atmosphere based on mutual trust and acceptance (see Example 20 below and 10, 18 above).

Example 20

P: Here are my comments on the new sections of the blog – don't worry, the expansiveness of the comments simply reflects the expansiveness of the work itself :-)

3. Assuring discursive acceptability: strategies that help to improve pre-service teachers' SP in relation to the acceptability of the academic register and also to develop their digital literacy specifically in terms of creating a blog (see Example 21 below and 4, 9, 12, 13, 15, 17 above).

Example 21

*A: **Regarding the formal aspects related to the creation of the blog in general, I think you could elaborate the visual aspect a little more. Add a title, maybe a cover image ... this could help a lot. Try playing around a little with these elements.***

4. Advising on the meeting of task requirements: strategies that put emphasis on the instructions provided to the pre-service teachers regarding creating or improving the SP (see Example 22 below and 9, 14 above).

Example 22

P: That said, the only thing that I can add is that a brief introduction to the Starting Point will need to be included, as established in the guidelines of the activity. Right now, this is the only section of the Portfolio, but throughout the course you will include others and a brief contextualization of each one to guide your reading will be valuable (...)

3.3. Pre-service Teachers' Reactions

This study also focuses on the pre-service teachers' reactions to the e-tutors' strategies, since understanding how effective these strategies could potentially be is key to the present study.

Providing information and instructions, explicit corrections and direct suggestions are taken into account by all the pre-service teachers who alter their subsequent drafts or their final versions in different ways, and except on one occasion in which pre-service teacher Pst2P acknowledged the e-tutor's explicit correction on content appropriateness (see Example 14 in the previous section), but it decided to go ahead with her original idea, only now accompanied by a justification of her inclusion of that content.

Example 23

Pst2P: Yes, I understand what you mean, but since they form part of my professional career and I know that they will be very useful for me in this training, I prefer to keep it like this with the clarification you recommend, adding it at the end of the "Experience" section. Let me know what you think.

On five occasions, some small explicit corrections such as commas, which appeared with strikethrough in the text were not taken into account and, curiously, on other occasions when these small issues were highlighted the pre-service teacher removed the whole text in that paragraph, and some corrections were even made erroneously.

All the **implicit corrections and indirect suggestions** in the data also prompted pre-service teachers to reformulate their texts in their drafts or final versions. This was mainly in relation to the digital literacy of the blog format, to the development of their own ideas and to the deepening of their reflections. The pre-service teachers were receptive to all remarks of this nature made by the e-tutors.

Regarding **suggestions**, direct or indirect, the pre-service teachers not only followed them but went beyond what was put forward, adding new and relevant content. The fact that the e-tutor drew the pre-service teacher's attention to certain aspects of their texts worked as a catalyst for adequate reformulation and/or further development. For instance, in Example 4 above, e-tutor M indirectly suggests that Pst1M add a comment to the picture placed on the blog home page, so that readers can understand the inclusion of such an image. From this

motivating suggestion, Pst1M reacts to the e-tutor's strategy in a creative way: a) following the suggestion by adding a comment on the image, and b) extending that suggestion with other images of feet, boots, paths, etc., which illustrate the visual metaphor of walking new paths, which from that moment onwards she decides to draw out by creating a common thread throughout her e-portfolio.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

As demand for online teacher education continues to grow, e-tutors are in need of a series of guidelines for best practice in online teaching to promote pre-service teachers' reflection processes. Although using e-portfolios in teacher education programmes is not new, e-tutors need to develop a series of strategies in order to make the most of the opportunities e-portfolios afford for carrying out their tutoring work more effectively.

The study identifies six types of discursive-pedagogical strategies in the data drawn from the online written interactions between the e-tutors and the pre-service teachers in the elaboration of their SP: *Suggesting; Inquiring for reflection; Providing information and instructions; Correcting; Giving positive feedback; and Using affective moves*. The most frequent strategies utilised by the e-tutors are those corresponding to a directive style: *Correcting; Suggesting; Providing information and instructions; and Giving positive feedback*. These results are in line with those of other studies -based on both written and oral interactions- which indicate *advising* as a frequent strategy [80, 45, 11, 51]. In Strong and Baron's study [80], of the 206 suggestions made, 80% were indirect advice and the remainders were direct. This pattern also coincides with the results of the present study, as in various instances both types of suggestions were found to co-occur, moving from indirect to direct. The least frequent strategy displayed by the e-tutors is *Inquiring for reflection*, showing that e-tutors played a less inquiring role in their interaction with the pre-service teachers. Hennissen *et al.* [11, p. 174] state that "the prescriptive style can be characterised as instructive, critical, with few questions and accompanied by a personal expression of support", a statement which lines up closely with the tutoring style seen in the data results of this study. Hennissen *et al.* [11] also point out that "most untrained mentor teachers appear to prefer the directive style" (p.174), and remark that training for e-tutors might influence their tutoring style. The three e-tutors in this study were novices and had not received any specific training on tutoring e-portfolios at the moment of collecting the data. As such, even if questioning is the most frequent strategy in some studies -such as that carried out by Angeli, Valanides & Bonk [51]- the authors framed the type of questioning as 'low-level' and concluded that the lack of adequate training to model critical-thinking skills in an online environment was a possible explanation for these results. However, Gareis & Nussbaum-Beach [45],

commenting on the results of their study, draw attention to mentors' capacity to prompt reflection among novice teachers rather than dictating their thinking and decisions through prescriptive advice, as seen for instance in results obtained by Sinclair [44]. It should be noted here that in both cases mentors had been trained and had previous experience in a face-to-face context. However, the lack of data-led accounts means that conclusions cannot be drawn about the influence of training on the use of tutoring strategies or skills [11, p. 180]. This could be determined by carrying out a comparative study involving both new e-tutors and those e-tutors who had previously received training and who also have experience in e-portfolio tutoring.

Another important strategy that emerged from the data is that of *Using affective moves*, which is paramount in the creation of a pleasant atmosphere based on mutual trust and acceptance. This statement is consonant with the views of Bierema and Merriam [43] and Badilla and Parra [47], who indicate that mutual respect, trust, and comfort are essential components of the e-tutoring relationship.

The list of strategies this study has identified is by no means an exhaustive one, but it does shed some light on e-tutors' need for guidelines towards best practices regarding the promotion of RP through the creation of pre-service teachers' e-portfolios. The results thus illustrate that some specific training is needed in order to provide e-tutors with a greater range of strategies, and specifically to develop inquiry strategies that can help them in fostering their students' self-awareness and autonomy. As Hennissen *et al.* [11] suggest, mentor teachers need a versatile supervisory repertoire in order to put different roles into practice, which means that they require training (p.180). On this topic, Guldberg & Pilkington [50] state that the tutor's role has traditionally been based on the premise of leadership and argue that it is possible for tutors to modify this role by taking a less interventionist role than is generally expected.

Further qualitative research is needed with regards to the identification of effective e-tutoring strategies in an e-learning teacher education context, and to their deeper effects on the student teachers' learning. A greater number of samples would also improve the study.

As Salmon [49] states, appropriate challenges and arguments will foster deeper thinking and reflection. Furthermore, in addition to creating a pleasant atmosphere of mutual respect and trust, the key transversal aspects in the e-tutoring context which should be considered part of the set of guidelines for e-tutors' best practices are those regarding finding the balance between the challenge and the support given to pre-service teachers [37, 7] and helping them in bridging the gap between theory and practice [38, 39].

In regard to how the pre-service teachers react to these strategies when they are utilised by the e-tutors in the creation of the SP, apart from one particular exception (see

Example 23 in section 3.3) and in the cases where the pre-service teachers might have failed to notice some corrections, all the strategies e-tutors employed were taken on board by all the pre-service teachers, who modified the drafts and final versions accordingly. However, it is not possible to determine whether the discursive-pedagogical strategies deployed by the e-tutors have a one-to-one correspondence with the pre-service teachers' reactions. It also bears noting that the observed key element in this case is the explicit reflection the pre-service teachers expressed in their first reflective document. And as such, it is not possible to know whether the above-mentioned strategies are going to help only in making the teacher trainees' reflection more explicitly stated or in fostering in them a new reflective tendency. As such, exploring the concatenation of e-tutors' and pre-service teachers' voices over a longer period of time with the objective of improving the tutoring process also represents an avenue for future research.

As the research context is an official master's degree, it should be noted that the e-portfolio is an essential requirement for successfully finishing the programme and, therefore, pre-service teachers' acknowledgment and consideration of their e-tutors' strategies may, to an extent, be done in the expectation of thus receiving a more positive evaluation. Nevertheless, the results presented here are relevant for gaining a deeper understanding of the processes involved in the development of RP in the first stages of building an e-portfolio, and can contribute to mapping the strategies employed by e-tutors in the tutoring process.

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