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Blogs in the modern foreign languages curriculum. A case study on the use of blogging as a pedagogic tool and a mode of assessment for modern foreign languages students

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ABSTRACT

Since the early 2000s, the numbers studying Modern Foreign Languages at university has declined, although there is a strong body of evidence that language capabilities are valued and in demand by employers, operating in global markets and working with international partners. A significant element in the Higher Education MFL curriculum to these challenges is to adopt innovative and engaging approaches to teaching, including the use of technology to develop the range and confidence of students' language skills and prepare them for formative and summative assessment. This paper, drawing on theoretical perspectives of social learning, peer collaboration and curriculum design, considers the role of blogging in developing language capability, engaging students with real life non-academic forms of reflective writing and addressing the interrelatedness of language skills, cultural awareness and personal growth. It discusses the challenges of embedding new assessment methods in the curriculum and potential implications for practice in and beyond Modern Languages learning and teaching.

1. Introduction

As the UK negotiates its departure from the European Union, the nation faces a language learning crisis (Kelly, 2018b; Tinsley, 2018) which could dramatically affect its socio-economic and political interactions with other countries, in particular those in which Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) are embedded into the school curriculum (e.g. France, Spain, Italy, Germany). Since the 2000s, there has been a gradual and concerning 'decline of interest in modern foreign languages among young people' (Mann, Brassell, & Bevan, 2011, p. 7) in the UK, reflected in dwindling numbers of school pupils studying a language to age 16 (Tinsley & Board, 2013). In many UK universities, recruitment to 'classic' MFL degrees, embracing various combinations of language, literature, history, culture, social and political studies has declined year on year, starkly evidenced by a 22% drop in applications in 2012/13 from which the discipline has not recovered (British Academy, 2018), and resulting in the closure of MFL departments in some 50 UK universities (Coussins & Harding-Esch, 2018). Over the same

period the number of non-specialist language learners on Institution-Wide Languages Programmes (IWLP) studying elective language modules in university MFL departments or Language Centres, within or alongside a degree programme has grown steadily: 'at least 53,200 and possibly as many as 62,200 students' (Association of University Language Centres and University Council for Modern Languages, 2018). This increasing take-up by non-specialists clearly suggests an appetite for the challenges, personal and broader benefits of MFL study, boosting employment prospects in economic, political, diplomatic, educational and public services (health, justice and law for example) sectors (Panetta, 2010), with humanitarian and other NGOs and as a key feature in the exercise of influence (Hinsliff, 2018).

Successive reports promote MFL study for personal and socio-economic purposes (British Academy, 2011; 2013; Tinsley & Board, 2013; Kelly, 2018a, 2018b), the importance of students developing linguistic and intercultural skills and promoting language students' capabilities as global citizens, working with international partners and operating in international markets (Mann et al., 2011; Tinsley & Board, 2013; University Alliance, 2013; Worton, 2009). The set of skills gained by MFL students appears to be even more important during 'turbulent times' (British Academy, 2011, p. 4), in periods of socio-political uncertainty such as the ongoing Brexit negotiations or 'economic instability' (Mann et al., 2011, p. 7). All these considerations underpin the importance of MFL curricula and teaching, both in motivating students (Smith, 2012) and preparing them for myriad multicultural contexts and uses (Corradini, Borthwick, & Gallagher-Brett, 2016; Kelly, 2016; Lugea, 2016).

This paper explores the pedagogic potential of innovation in the MFL curriculum, through the theoretical lenses of constructive alignment (Biggs & Tang, 2011) and assessment for learning (Price, Carroll, O'Donovan, & Rust, 2011; Rust, O'Donovan, & Price, 2005). The approach discussed considers the effectiveness of blogging both as a pedagogic tool and as a mode of assessment, with a goal of enabling students to develop language skills in a supposedly more applied and authentic environment. We discuss possible reasons (including institutional constraints) why the original pedagogic aims of the blog project were not achieved, explain the rationale for subsequent changes in both the focus and purpose of blogging and evaluate the implications of these for practice. The project was conducted at a pre-'92 UK university, the University of Kent, although we suggest that the findings can apply more widely.

2. The rationale for using blogs in MFL

There is a growing body of evidence (e.g. Ferrari et al., 2009; Foster, 2015; Garcia, Elbeltagi, Brown, & Dungay, 2015; Hunt, Neill, & Barnes, 2007) to suggest that technology and digital tools can promote teaching innovation and significantly enhance student learning. Technology fosters creativity and student confidence (Hunt et al., 2007), promotes a shift towards a student-centred and holistic approach (Sun, 2009) and, consequently, encourages a teaching and learning experience more focused on individual needs and preferences (Domalewska, 2014).

The literature suggests there are rich benefits to students (within a single institution or more widely, for example with Erasmus students elsewhere in the UK or abroad) sharing and discussing each other's work, developing students' ability to communicate meaningfully in the target language and develop fluency (see for example Sun, 2009). Blogging is a well-established

practice in other teaching and learning contexts, such as English for Academic Purposes (EAP), English as a Foreign Language (EFL), English as a Second Language (ESL) and teacher education (Campbell, 2003; Sun, 2009; Fageeh, 2011; Fisher and Kim, 2013; Hwang & Chen, 2013; Hwang, Shih, Ma, Shadiev, & Chen, 2016Mar-Molinero & Lewis, 2016). Blogging promotes effective, autonomous, and active learning, by fostering student motivation and student commitment (Price et al., 2011), a sense of ownership and agency (Sun, 2009) and collaboration (Domalewska, 2014). The personal, experiential, and accessible nature of blogs make them particularly suitable for promoting reflective writing, further personalized through uploading videos, images or links. For these reasons, blogs have been used as student diaries, teacher journals (Fisher and Kim, 2013), learning logs (Wagner, 2003), travelogue (Oravec, 2002), portfolios, and research blogs (Forster & Tam, 2004). Martindale and Wiley (2005), Wang and Hsu (2008), Dippold (2009) and Robertson (2011) identify a number of benefits on the use of blogging for MFL students. These include promoting student writing, enabling collaboration in preparation for, or to follow up on, in-class discussion, encouraging peer feedback and developing learner autonomy. Foster (2015) identifies blogs as being particularly important in enabling students, as readers and writers, to co-construct their own learning. Blogging can be experienced as an enjoyable and purposeful activity rather than an onerous task (Domalewska, 2014), promote non-academic writing skills, help students develop the skills of writing for different audiences and networking more widely (Ferrari et al., 2009), employability skills (Lugea, 2016), an 'intercultural orientation to language learning' (Scarino, 2010, p. 328) and skills of creativity, peer collaboration, adaptability and critical thinking (Fageeh, 2011). Ioannou-Georgiou (2005), Klapper (2005), Lundstrom and Baker (2009), Ortega (2007), Price et al., 2011) and Sun (2009) evidence a correlation between regular blogging, improved language proficiency and higher academic achievement, increased motivation though learners getting formative feedback on their progress and opportunities to practice the language in a non-classroom environment.

Kerawalla, Minocha, Kirkup, and Conole (2009) are one of fewer voices to sound a cautionary note, noting that effective blogging assumes a range of social and digital skills which students may not possess and that outcomes may be adversely affected if the purpose of the blog is not clear. This latter finding is particularly significant for this project. Ongoing formative and summative use of assessment is particularly important in MFL and the original blog project was conceived as being primarily developmental – as we explain later, this perception contributed the (lack of) engagement by students for whom the blog project was originally designed.

3. MFL curriculum design and blogging

MFL study is multifaceted, requiring students to develop both receptive (listening and reading) and productive (speaking and writing) skills. Skills development occurs in tandem with students' ability to deal in an increasingly sophisticated way with complex unpredictable responses and situations, drawing on cultural competencies and awareness of register, fluency and accuracy.

The University of Kent MFL degree, in common with many other UK MFL programmes, is designed to address two distinct cohorts, who are taught separately throughout the first year and for some of the second. One cohort comprises *ab initio* students with basic or no previous knowledge of the target language. The other

comprises students who have studied one or more languages at A level (Post-A Level students). The aim is that, by the end of the second year, all students should have developed their skills and confidence to a point where they are linguistically and culturally prepared to make the most of the opportunities the third year, the Year Abroad (YA), gives. Both cohorts are taught together throughout Year 4, based on the assumption that both cohorts have reached the same level of language proficiency (B2 according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) descriptors). Table 1 summarizes the primary focus in each year.

The added value of the YA in the MFL curriculum is explicitly recognised by the British Academy (2011) and students themselves often describe it as a life-changing experience. DeKeyser (2007, p. 208) aptly notes that for some 'parents, teachers, administrators, and prospective employers, study abroad is not only the best form of practice, sometimes it is the only form they consider to be useful'. The YA is pivotal in enabling students to develop high level language proficiency and improve their communication skills in academic and non-academic registers. The relevance and value of MFL rests on the development of all four skills and 'the more recently emphasised skills of interaction, mediation and non-verbal communication skills' (Kelly, 2018b, p. 17–18). These capabilities are increasingly important in an international job market

Table 1. Skills development in the MFL curriculum.

Year	CEFR Level	Primary focus	Comments
1 ab initio	(A1/A2)	Listening & speaking; developing basic language skills; functional and communicative language; vocabulary development; grammar and structure; accuracy.	Basic language skills and building confidence. Beginning to recognise different registers (formal compared to informal) and cultural awareness.
1 post-A level	(B1)	Listening, speaking, reading and writing.; developing ability to recognise and respond to a range of familiar contexts and situations and some unpredictable/new situations; vocabulary development; more complex grammar and structure; accuracy.	Functional capability in semi-authentic situations and extending ability to recognise (and use with reasonable accuracy) appropriate register.
2	(B1/B2)	Writing & speaking; intercultural skills; critical thinking; developing fluency in authentic situations.	Materials and interactions mirror authentic contexts and growing ability to recognise and use different registers. Assessed 'with a sense of "real purpose"' and '"real audience"' (Rust, 2002, p. 2).
3 (Year abroad)		Spoken fluency; sociolinguistic skills; sophisticated vocabulary development.	'The jewel in the crown of a good MFL degree' (Coussins & Harding-Esch, 2018, p. 4). Immersion in cultural and educational/workplace environments.
4	(C1/C2)	All 4 skills, aiming for fluency in spoken and written language; awareness of nuance; high level of intercultural proficiency.	Proficiency in all areas, assessed through oral presentations, written assignments, (including a dissertation) extended translation skills.

Table 2. 21st century skills (Higher Education Academy, 2018).

Literacies	Competencies	Character Character qualitie
• literacy • numeracy • citizenship • digital • media	• critical thinking • creativity • colaboration	• curiosity • initiative • persistence • resilience • adaptability • leadership

where growing 'attention is being paid to the employment prospects which attach to a given degree path' (Coleman, 2005b: 17) and which universities are increasingly keen to promote (British Academy, 2014), allied to the development of the so-called 21st century skills outlined in Table 2.

In the context of a MFL curriculum, which provides advanced competency in the target language and knowledge of the corresponding culture/society, we conceive blogging as an effective and relevant pedagogical tool. It both contributes to the development of language skills and cultural awareness, and enhances the 21st century skillset, given the personal and experiential nature of blog itself, to promote students' reflection on their own learning.

4. The role of assessment in HE and blogging as an assessment practice in MFL

We turn now to the role of assessment principles and practices in the curriculum, and the role of perceptions of the nature and purpose of assessment and feedback. The literature offers compelling arguments to promote assessments as effective opportunities for learning development and learning experience enhancement. The principles of constructive alignment (which orientated our approach to the assessment strategy implemented for the blog project) stress 'the interdependence of learning outcomes, teaching (i.e. learning methods) and assessment with, ideally, all three "aligned" as equal partners' (Price et al., 2011, p. 480). Rust (2002) refers to reliability, validity, relevance and transferability as key principles in terms of assessment design and development, emphasizing the crucial importance of '[e] xplicitness in terms of learning outcomes and assessment criteria' (Rust, 2002, p. 2) to promote and assess a broader range of skills.

Boud and Soler (2015) and Scarino (2010) argue that assessment practices should be seen as dynamic, formative and contributing to personal growth. Given the pivotal role of assessment in students' academic life, it is particularly important that assessment practices focus on the process as well as endpoints, such as getting good marks, designing assessments which both provide measurement of learning but also actively contribute to it (Rust, 2002) and 'comprise an authentic representation of the course intended learning outcomes' (Biggs & Tang, 2011, p. 191). Consequently, an effective assessment strategy involves a combination of formative assessment, designed to give students meaningful feedback on areas to improve which can feed forward to future tasks (Pitt & Norton, 2017), and summative assessment, resulting in marks/grades, identifying whether student performance at a specified level means they can progress to the next stage (see for example Price et al., 2011).

These principles apply equally to MFL assessment, although there are some distinctive features of MFL which can affect students' perceptions and performance. Assessments can exacerbate issues surrounding 'language anxiety' (Coleman & Klapper, 2005, p. 39) associated with oral presentations, conversation classes, and interactions with native speakers. Languages learners may feel frustrated because they have not mastered a language to the extent they want to without a considerable commitment of time (Kelly, 2016). Our experiences suggest that some students find speaking in their target language(s) comparatively harder than writing, especially before the YA. Arguably, in written assignments students have more time to think, to develop their own ideas and to focus both on grammatical accuracy and general fluency without the pressure of providing an immediate answer. MFL students assessed through written assignments deal much better with language anxiety (Baran-Lucarz, 2016; Horwitz, 2010; Sun, 2009).

However, those skills which are highly valued (and assessed) in Year 4 are much less practised and may even atrophy in the course of the YA, leading to a disconnect between Year 3 (in which speaking is the most practiced skill due to the constant interactions with native speakers) and Year 4. While Year 4 learning outcomes include an expectation that students can demonstrate their capacity to 'use a range of registers in the target language' and 'perfected linguistic skills by means of studying grammatical and lexical subtleties of the target language', (University of Kent, [online]), Year 4 assessments place greater emphasis on mediation, translation and written skills proficiency, with oral tasks featuring much less in the curriculum and assessments. For example, Year 4 students at Kent were asked to give a short oral presentation on an aspect of Italian culture of their own choosing as the only component for assessing their YA. The marks assigned to this summative task were very modest, students' work was assessed solely by a member of staff and gave little scope for students to draw out the richness of their YA experience, or give and receive peer feedback.

There are, however, some challenges that should be taken into consideration. While language anxiety is more usually associated with spoken language production, it is not entirely absent from a consideration of written language, particularly in a forum which may be viewed by many and where there is a fear that responses may be unhelpful, have a potentially negative impact or be detrimental to individuals' morale. For instance, assumptions about students' willingness to interact, collaborate and be responsive should not be taken for granted (Forster & Tam, 2004). Domalewska (2014) notes the importance of a clear structure, and a mutually agreed understanding of everyone's roles, for example as contributors to, or a moderator of, an online forum.

Mindful of these perspectives and the possible advantages and disadvantages to blogging, there appeared to be a strong rationale for investigating the effect of incorporating a blog, combining formative peer feedback and summative academic feedback, into the curriculum and offering students opportunities to discuss the academic, working and life experiences of their year abroad.

The skills which are developed and assessed through the blog project are related to language production and fluency (e.g. range of expressions, lexical subtleties, and vocabulary); the use of real-life non-academic registers; the critical analysis and critical discussion of culture and society, such as education, politics, environmental issues, history etc. including references to topics discussed in class; and the ability to critically

reflect on own experience as language learners and individual interaction with native speakers.

5. Institutional context

MFL students at the University of Kent spend the third year of their degree studying and/or working in one or more countries, depending on whether they are single or joint honours students. For reasons previously discussed, during their YA students have limited scope to discuss or share their academic, working or personal experiences, maintain and enhance their writing skills, broaden and deepen their language capability and reflect on their personal growth. The YA blog was thus conceived both to promote these aims for students, and for teachers to explore whether students understood and engaged actively in the process of giving and receiving peer feedback and the extent to which that feedback gave them something on which they could act (e.g. Price et al., 2011; Rust et al., 2005).

While the focus of the YA blog is on pedagogic considerations, there were practical considerations too. Academic and teaching staff, responding to other internal and external drivers (e.g. REF, TEF, KEF), have limited time for other tasks. The practical advantages of the pilot were that it could be implemented by a single teacher, and the university VLE – which students were in the habit of accessing throughout their degree programme – provided a ready platform for students to upload their blogposts for formative feedback and summative online marking. Positive encouragement to pursue the blog project came from the Modern Languages department, believing it offered scope to promote study abroad and employment opportunities provided by the YA. Resources elsewhere suggested there was considerable potential of such sites as marketing and recruitment tools, linked to departmental websites or as an evolving website aimed at a wider audience. The site could include blog posts (with students' permission, as the original purpose and audience of the blog would be different), more images, videos, links and potentially an English translation, with regular updates on specific issues e.g. history, politics, culture, society. Examples elsewhere include the Decameron site at Brown University, US (https://www.brown.edu/Departments/Italian_Studies/dweb/pedagogy/) and various UK MFL blogs, such as those of the Universities of Durham (http://www.thedefinitearticle.org/year-abroad1.html), Leicester (https://studentblogs.le.ac.uk/modern-languages/), and Liverpool (https://www.liverpool.ac.uk/modern-languages-and-cultures/blog/#d.en.664358). It is notable, however, that these resources appear not to be linked to assessment, as this blog project was intended to be.

One (possibly unintended?) consequence of the decline in FT student numbers on MFL degrees and the rise in students on IWLPs, has been an increasing tendency for those teaching on 'service' languages provision to be part-time staff on precarious contracts, reflecting institutional uncertainty about fluctuating student numbers. A more casualised workforce is certainly not confined to MFL (see for example Gilbert, 2013), but is particularly relevant in this instance for two reasons. Firstly, while permanent members of staff were very supportive of the blog initiative, when the project was first piloted in 2015, the teacher leading the project was a part-time teacher on a 3-year fixed term contract, and when the project was re-launched in 2017, he was working in another HE institution and students understandably perceived him as being external to the core team. Secondly, part-time teachers are not institutionally

positioned or incentivised to undertake curriculum innovation, particularly in relation to making changes in assessment practices. These factors were significant for this study, emerging as main challenges in implementing the blog pilot and contributing to discrepancies between what the original project set out to achieve and what actually transpired.

6. Methods

The blog initiative was created and led by the native speaker co-author of this paper. As the blog project involved students and an evaluation of the project would include gathering feedback from students, full ethical clearance, based on BERA guidelines, was needed before the project could commence. The ethics application covered information which would go to students, the aims and scope of the project, criteria for inclusion, explaining that participation was voluntary, students could withdraw from the project at any time, all data gathered would be anonymised to protect student confidentiality and securely stored for a limited period. Having gained ethical approval, the initiative was piloted in 2015, 'rested' the following year as the part-timer was assigned different teaching and re-run in 2017 by another fulltime member of staff and a Graduate Teaching Assistant, as the part-timer had by that time taken up a permanent post elsewhere. This lack of continuity was very challenging and had a big impact on the implementation of the project. This will be further explored in the 'Discussion' section.

In this paper we describe the background to the original blog project, but focus primarily on the revised implementation during the 2017/18 academic year, for which data have been gathered.

The original YA blog project was based on MFL students writing a series (3–8) of short (ca 250 words) blog posts during their year abroad, posted on the institutional VLE for other students to comment on as they wished. Each student would then choose one of their blogposts to expand into an 800-word piece for formative peer assessment and summative assessment in Year 4. The intention was to give Year 3 students opportunities to practise and improve their writing skills, by means of a non-academic and reflective format, benefit from being part of a virtual community, where issues or challenges related to living and working in a different culture could be discussed with their classmates in preparation for a summative assessment in Year 4.

The impact of this innovation would be evaluated through a qualitative approach based on the analysis of students' feedback, both informal (i.e. gained during the seminars) and formal (i.e. based on the feedback form we designed and also when giving students feedback on their assignment or module evaluation questionnaires). The extent of students' participation in, and commitment to, the project was also monitored. These multiple methods of gaining feedback proved critical in gauging the effectiveness of the blog initiative.

7. Implementation

7.1. Step 1

Implementation was constrained by the difficulty of reaching Year 3 students who, by the time the project had been approved, were already on their YA. Consequently, the decision was made to run the 2017 pilot by inviting 20 final-year BA students enrolled in the module *Learning Italian 5 (Advanced)* who had spent the previous year studying and/or working in Italy to participate in the 'Year Abroad blog' project. They were briefed in class on what their participation would involve, what blogging involved and that they should be writing in a non-academic style at a standard and range framed by the learning outcomes of advanced (final year) language modules in Italian (see page 8). The original 800-word summative assessment was cut to 200–400 words to encourage student participation, as the pilot was not officially part of the curriculum and could not be summatively assessed through real marks, and reduce their workload. After the briefing, students had a couple of weeks to decide whether to participate in the project and discuss their potential blogpost ideas in small groups with their seminar leaders. Subsequently, individuals would upload their blog for formative peer feedback; finally, they would upload the revised assignment for summative assessment.

However, none of this group expressed interest in, or commitment to, participating in the pilot. Discussions with colleagues suggested four principal reasons:

- the intense student workload (final-year students are concentrating on high-stakes assessments);
- the formative peer-assessment component;
- the non-academic style of the written assignment, which they considered insufficiently challenging for final-year students;
- the curriculum emphasis in the final year is on developing students' high level translation skills from and into Italian language.

7.2. Step 2

While this was very disappointing, we remained convinced that while blogging had potential, the project needed to be refocused to address these concerns. This was in the light of the factors above and the need to offer a much clearer focus on the sociocultural purpose of the blog. A revised ethics application was approved and the project re-launched (with the help of an academic member of staff who had been involved in the original project and a new Graduate Teaching Assistant who had not) in Autumn 2017 with 13 second-year BA students enrolled in the module *Learning Italian 2 (Intermediate)*. The pedagogic rationale for working with this cohort was clearer. The students were familiar with peer assessment and feedback practices from Year 1 and there was better alignment between their language level and the non-academic style of the blogposts. Furthermore, the project actively supported their preparations for the year abroad, reinforcing the personal, experiential and accessible nature of the blog, as 'the quality of the students' learning experience abroad depends to a large extent on their preparation at home'

(DeKeyser, 2007, p. 217), thus signalling that preparation for and subsequent reflection on the YA were both integral to their studies.

For these reasons, the project components remained unaltered but the blog post title had to be changed. All students were required to answer, in Italian, the following questions: 'What are your expectations for the year abroad? In which city have you decided to spend it? Why? What impact do you think the year abroad will have on your personal and professional growth?' Students could thus benefit from the written assignment to improve their written language skills and, additionally, to start reflecting on their expectations about the year abroad.

8. Data collection and analysis

This cohort of students appeared more engaged with the project from the beginning. They chose their peer assessors and a total of 9 draft blog posts were submitted and peer-assessed, focusing on five aspects: grammar, syntax, range of vocabulary, spelling, interesting content as well as an overall peer comment. The comments and suggestions provided in the peer-assessment form were usually detailed and supportive.

Of the 13, only three students completed formal feedback forms, possibly due to a perception that the blog was tangential to other provision and the marks were relatively insignificant in determining their overall degree classification. Nevertheless, all three reported that the 'year abroad blog' project was interesting, that the level of participation required was manageable and that the most engaging aspect of the project was writing in a non-academic style. 2/3 stated that peer-assessment was helpful and only 1/3 found it not particularly helpful, specifying that 'although my partner pointed out some mistakes, I wasn't sure other than those, how to improve my work further'. Students reported a number of benefits: the project helped improve their grammar, vocabulary and syntax in the Italian language, their transferable skills and creative writing. They all reported an improvement in terms of confidence, stating that it was particularly due to the non-academic style of the written assignment and the extra opportunity to practice writing skills. Informal feedback (in 1–1 office hours and informal conversations) evidenced general increases in student satisfaction, confidence and engagement. In particular, students appreciated the possibility of creative and collaborative experimentation with language. Through blogging, students creatively developed both their language skills and their linguistic identity, taking charge of their learning completely independently.

9. Discussion

The notion of innovation is inextricably intertwined with that of change (Hannan & Silver, 2000) and raises challenges. In times where the Higher Education sector is under pressure and student numbers in MFL are dropping, it is challenging to introduce innovative projects, as it takes time and extra resources for both institutions and students to get accustomed to different teaching approaches and assessment practices.

The limitations of this initiative need to be acknowledged and addressed in any future developments and implementation. Central to the difficulties in the initial (final year) blog project was the question of the place and status (voluntary and not

associated with 'real' marks) of the blog, a perception that the informal nature of the language used was inappropriate for final year students and that peer assessment was seen as insufficiently challenging compared to other final year assessments. Final year students might have been more focused on actual study commitments and more imminent questions of their future education and/or employment. Second-year students, however, demonstrated excitement and interest about the possibility of writing on the opportunities and future challenges of the year abroad; the blog was appropriate to their language level and provided a virtual space to address both their expectations and their concerns. Nevertheless, although the project promoted a student-centred learning environment and enhanced learner autonomy, evidenced by formal and informal feedback received, students still needed more guidance in relation to the peer assessment, particularly in giving constructive and effective peer feedback and tending to rely more heavily on teacher feedback and support. The Year 2 initiative suggests there was greater student engagement, but the relatively low returns on feedback means exercising considerable caution about the findings.

The original pilot and the revised – modest, though more successful – blog project highlighted a number of issues overall. In particular, we identified three main areas that affected the project and, consequently, require careful consideration and additional changes or adjustments in the future:

- implementation strategy: embedding an initiative of this kind requires sustained commitment of time and resources. Part-time staff are limited in what they can achieve and fulltime staff may be too pressed for time to champion another initiative.
- assessment practices: assessment tasks, be they formative or summative, need to be fully integrated into the curriculum at the design stage so that it is clear how they are aligned and what their purpose is. Bolt-on initiatives are pedagogically unsound and engagement becomes problematic if they are not a coherent part of the curriculum.
- student target group: due thought needs to be given to the most effective educational positioning.

In summary, the pilot's findings strongly indicate the need for further research into the practice implications of the role of blogs (Azizinezhad and Haschemi, 2011), their potential for formative and peer feedback, the challenges and opportunities of blogging in summative assessment and effective strategies to integrate it into the curriculum (Rust, 2002).

It is crucial to take all these factors into account in future iterations of the blog initiative. Assessment task types and practices need to offer sufficient variety and range to enable students to demonstrate their skills, and a blog, properly integrated into the curriculum, is one element of this. Embedding blogging from the outset enables coherent links to be made between the blog and the curriculum, integrating it into the programme rather than confining it to the YA and building skills, confidence and language capability as ends in themselves and in preparation for summative assessments. Student contributions and skills development are likely to vary depending on confidence and language level: first year students may be reading

blogposts more than actively contributing, being aware of a blog as a resource alongside other opportunities for peer learning more generally across the first year. This provides a sound basis for the opportunity in Year 2 to practise writing skills, consolidate language knowledge and share questions and concerns before students embark on the YA, enabling students to critically reflect on their expectations and possibility for professional or personal growth. This also enables self-assessment to be built into the curriculum.

Blogging as assessment would require final year assessments to be changed in order to include a more challenging written assignment, focusing less on individual academic/ working experiences during the year abroad, instead offering critical evaluation and analysis of the socio-political, historical and cultural aspects of the country. This could contribute to developing a link with the content of other modules, establishing that 'intercultural orientation' (Scarino, 2010, p. 327) necessary for a more integrated approach to the study of language and culture in the MFL curriculum. Making the blog accessible to a wider audience and possibly developing it into a website would give students another form of reward in itself for their work. Crucially, the purpose of the blog and the benefits of participating, both to enhance student confidence – creating teaching and learning 'environments that both stimulate innovatory practices and facilitate change through their diffusion' (Smith, 2012, p. 178) – and to develop a rich range of linguistic and cultural skills, needs to be clear and integrated throughout the curriculum.

10. Conclusion

It is always challenging to introduce innovative projects (see for example Smith, 2012) and many useful lessons have been learned in the course of the blog initiative. The key issues which the study to date have highlighted, and which are pertinent beyond the specific context discussed in this paper are both pedagogic and organisational, reflecting fundamental changes in the context of HE teaching. Pedagogically, a key aspect contributing to student engagement (or not) is the extent to which robust principles of curriculum design are applied to ensure a fully integrated curriculum in which teaching, learning and assessment are aligned to give cumulatively more challenging experiences which is meaningful and motivating for students, and whose value is visible to them and other stakeholders, such as employers. Organisationally, such initiatives need consistent champions to support and enable change, which can be more difficult to achieve if staff are on variously precarious contracts, student numbers are lower or in a risk-averse organisational culture.

However, the qualitative analysis adopted shows that the use of blogging as a pedagogic tool and mode of assessment can enhance language teaching and learning, promoting and deepening skills of benefit both to individuals and to society more broadly, including the 21st century skills previously discussed, placing learning as a social activity front and centre and enabling students to experience language not as a predetermined and immutable entity but a dynamic phenomenon, constantly shaped by socio-economic and cultural factors. We argue that blogging can extend interactions and collaborations beyond MFL disciplines, reaching non-HE audiences and generating an outward-facing and dynamic dialogue, deepening intercultural skills and promoting personal growth while being part of meaningful formative and summative assessment and feedback practices.

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