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Enhancing motivation for writing in a foreign language: Blogging in Spanish and French

Abstract

This study focuses on the development of an innovative pedagogy that utilizes Information and Communication Technologies (ICT). Grounded in socio-constructivist theories, it investigates the benefits and constraints associated with blogging as a pedagogical activity.

The study is based on a set of surveys administered to 143 students of Spanish and French at Monash University over the course of one semester as part of a qualitative and quantitative research project that introduced blogging as a teaching and learning tool. The surveys were designed to gather information about the students’ own perceptions of blogging as a way of developing their writing skills and the challenges they encountered in the process. Although it is taken for granted that intermediate/advanced students will use technology in foreign language learning, little research has been done on the students’ own experience of this or on the learning outcomes.

Our analysis indicates that although the degree of motivation of the students fluctuated over the period of study there was an overall tendency to prefer blogging to the traditional ‘pen and paper’ essay writing.
1. Aims and background of the project

In today’s globalized and digitalized world, multimedia tasks have become an essential part of everyday life. Research on the utilization of digital media is rapidly developing as well, and has been undertaken in the areas of media and technology (Peppler and Kafai 2007), blogging in journalism (Godwin-Jones 2003; Gunter et al. 2009), and teacher training and development (Camilleri et al. 2007), to mention just a few.

Our experience in language teaching tells us that intermediate/advanced students need activities that encourage and motivate them to further improve their language skills. In the digital era in which we are now living, online tools and services that facilitate the development of reading and writing skills can be accessed through a web browser. Proofing tools, spell checkers, grammars and language forums are easily accessible (Godwin-Jones 2003).

Recent studies have indicated that blogging can be used as a support learning and teaching tool (Churchill 2011). It provides an opportunity for peer-group commentary (Churchill 2009, 2011) and can assist postgraduate students in their studies (Churchill 2009, 2011; Kerawalla et al. 2009).

Blogging offers an up-to-date learning medium for young students and has potential as a pedagogical alternative to assist the development of writing skills in the production of original work (Pinkman 2005; Rivens Mompean 2010; Warschauer 2010). Research in the use of blogs in higher education is increasing (Weller 2007), however it is still limited in its scope as far as foreign-language learning is concerned. The majority of studies up to this point have been centred on short-term pilot projects with a small number of participants, and they have considered a single language at a time. Some examples are available for ESL (Rivens Mompean 2010; Yang 2009; Wu 2008), Spanish (Lee 2010) and French (Dompmartin-Normand 2008). Masgoret and Gardner (2003) confirm that motivation, self-confidence and exposure to the language are pivotal to effective language learning, but their analysis does not include the use of blogging in any detail.

The present project therefore sought to investigate whether blogging could be used to enhance language skill development and improve motivation in the foreign language classroom by conducting surveys of students who were developing a blog over the course of a semester.

2. Methodology

Our project differed from previous ones (Churchill 2009, 2011; Kerawalla et al. 2009) in three important ways. Firstly, it used a larger group of participants (143 language learners). Secondly, it investigated the experiences of students of two different languages (Spanish and French) simultaneously. Thirdly, it monitored
the students’ motivation, involvement and experience over time by conducting surveys at the beginning, in the middle, and at the end of the semester, in contrast to previous studies that mainly obtained feedback from students at the end of the program (Churchill 2011). By conducting three surveys we were able to gain valuable information regarding changes in motivation and opinions over time.

Students at the beginning of the semester were asked to select a topic for their blogs from a list of over 30 topics. Once the topic was selected they constructed and maintained their site by writing entries of at least 80 words on a regular basis, giving a total of eight entries for the whole semester. Language classes assisted students in their writing expression by presenting descriptive, narrative, expository and argumentative texts and identifying the key linguistic features that shaped them. Feedback on students’ work was provided promptly on paper to protect their privacy, as on-line comments would have been visible to the whole group. Language instructors encouraged students in their efforts to convey their ideas clearly and assisted them in the construction of their site when required.

Blog entries were part of the overall course assessment requirements, following Churchill’s (2009, 2011) finding that this would have a positive impact on students’ motivation. The blog entries represented 20% of the total mark for the unit. All three surveys were assessed.

2.1 Participants

The project involved students, language instructors and language coordinators. Student participants were enrolled in Spanish and French B1 and B2 levels, following the Common European Framework, at Monash University, Australia. A total of 43 students were enrolled in Spanish and 100 students in French.

The instructors consisted of three female Spanish language instructors with between two and ten years’ teaching experience, and three French language instructors, two female and one male, whose teaching experience ranged between six years and less than one year. In addition there were two language coordinators, one for each language.

The coordinators and language instructors set the criteria, assisted and encouraged students with their blogging and monitored the activity. Students completed their work and provided feedback through surveys. In our study we also made sure that open communication among participants was maintained at all times. Spanish and French language coordinators conducted weekly meetings with the language instructors to oversee the development of the project and minor adjustments were introduced when the need arose.
2.2 Instruments

Information for the study was obtained by using a series of instruments: three surveys, a focus group of language learners, a focus group of language instructors, and a reflective diary kept by the researchers. As this paper mainly illustrates the material presented in the LCNAU (Languages and Cultures Network for Australian Universities) Colloquium in 2011, the focus of this paper is on the three surveys administered to students.

The participants in this project were asked to complete the questionnaires distributed in hard copy during the semester. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, according to the principles of Monash University’s Human Ethics Committee.

Survey 1 comprised yes/no and multiple choice questions and free writing segments, and was completed before the posting of the first blog entries took place. This first questionnaire sought to gather information on students’ knowledge of and experience with blogging, to identify the potential difficulties they anticipated, and to gauge their motivation towards the project (see Appendix A).

Survey 2 was administered in week five of the project. It contained questions about difficulties and motivation that were evaluated on a Likert scale (1 = strongly agree; 2 = agree; 3 = no opinion; 4 = disagree; 5 = strongly disagree), free writing segments that enabled the students to identify the positive and negative aspects of blogging, and some repeated questions from Survey 1, making a comparison of the two surveys possible (see Appendix B).

Survey 3 was administered in weeks eleven and twelve, corresponding to the last two weeks of the teaching semester. Questions on difficulties and motivation were again included in this final survey. Students were also asked questions about the amount of time spent on the activity and their attitudes towards receiving comments, and had to select descriptors from a list to evaluate the project (see Appendix C).

3. Research questions

The following questions are specifically addressed in this study:

1. Did students’ motivation for blogging change throughout the semester?
2. How did students reflect upon their blogging experience?

4. Results

The number of respondents varied for each survey. Of the 143 students, 130 returned Survey 1, 111 completed Survey 2, and 120 responded to Survey 3. To maintain analytical consistency, and considering that the number of answers also depended
on the question type (e.g. open, semi-open, close-ended, multiple choice), results are shown as percentages.

4.1 Did students’ motivation for blogging change throughout the semester?

To answer this question we gathered information from the students regarding (i) their attitudes towards blogging; (ii) their views on the purpose of constructing and maintaining a blog; and (iii) the difficulties they faced with the process of blogging over the course of the project.

In order to evaluate the changes over time, we used the same question (‘Are you motivated by this project?’) in the first two surveys (Survey 1, 8; Survey 2, 12). An expanded version of the question was included in the last survey (Survey 3, 10: ‘How did you feel about blogging in the foreign language? More, equally, or less motivated than at the beginning of the semester?’). At the beginning of the project, 59% of the students replied that they were motivated by blogging, as against 28% who marked ‘No opinion’ and 13% who marked ‘No’.

In the middle survey, 64% gave positive answers, 15% a negative one and 21% still had no opinion. In the final survey, 44% declared they were more motivated at the end of the project, whereas 39% said they were equally motivated and 17% less motivated. In other words, throughout the project more students felt motivated than not. The degree of motivation peaked in the middle survey, whereas only 4% were added at the end of the project to the initial 13% who were not motivated.

In order to understand the meaning of these results, we firstly paid attention to the link between motivation and difficulties. Students were asked to list three kinds of expected problems (Survey 1, 7), and technical difficulties were the ones most frequently cited, in 33% of answers. They also mentioned the problems of time management (11%) and finding relevant sources (9%). The lack of motivation itself was also identified as a potential difficulty in Survey 1, although at a low frequency (3%). This suggests that some of the students realized at the outset that maintaining motivation to blog as a pedagogical activity could be a challenge throughout the semester. A detailed analysis of how preconceived and actual difficulties impacted on the students’ motivation can be found in Normand-Marconnet and Cordella (2012).

The surveys also showed that time management, finding sources and staying motivated remained the three main concerns for students throughout the project, with ratings above 30% in the combined categories ‘very difficult’ and ‘difficult’. The percentage of answers in these categories increased significantly between the fifth and twelfth week for time management (from 33% to 48%), and for motivation (from 23% to 31%), while it decreased slightly for locating sources, despite staying at the highest level of concern (from 43% to 40% of answers).
Secondly, we tried to verify how motivation could be sustained by a consensus on the benefits of blogging. Survey 1 featured two free-writing segment questions in which students were asked to identify the main characteristics of a blog compared to a website (Survey 1, 5). For our respondents, a blog appeared to be opinion-based and topic-oriented (56%), interactive (20%), a sort of ‘online journal’ (16%), informative and educational (6%). A website was identified as a personal (37%), but also as a social site (32%), not interactive (21%), and business or service-oriented (10%). The following question was about the purpose of blogging in a foreign language class (Survey 1, 6: ‘What do you think the purpose of using a blog in a foreign language class is?’). The question elicited positive responses, as students cited purely beneficial goals (see Table 1). ‘Improving overall skills’ headed the list with 35% of the students in this category, followed by ‘enabling everyday usage outside the classroom’ (19%). In addition, 16% described the purpose of the project as ‘a way to modernize the teaching and learning language approach’. The ‘other’ rubrics included the following observations: ‘allowing students interaction’, ‘gaining knowledge on topics’, ‘using current technology’, ‘sharing writing with others’, and ‘tracking students’ progress easily’.

The following excerpts have been selected to illustrate the wide range of opinions on blogging expressed by the students: “being able to apply a contemporary approach to learning French through a strong communicative way which is relevant to our age group” (French Studies, student 2), “help build on language skills and gain insight into different aspects of the culture” (French Studies, student 47), “to encourage proactive learning and research and to make learning more interesting” (Spanish Studies, student 80), “creating an adaptable forum for research” (Spanish Studies, student 88).

Table 1: The purpose of blogging in a foreign language class

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Improving overall skills</th>
<th>Enabling everyday usage outside the classroom</th>
<th>Modernizing teaching/learning approach</th>
<th>Improving written skills</th>
<th>Stimulating student’s interest</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>No answer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>35%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.2 How did students reflect upon their blogging experience?

Students were asked to reflect upon the difficulties and benefits of posting regular blog entries compared with writing pen and paper assignments (Survey 2, 3–7). Table 2 shows that the same number of students (21% for both categories) considered blog entries to be less formal than essays. Topic choice, format, and content were
considered more flexible and personal. Similarly, 59% found blogging on a specific topic easier than writing freely, while 25% indicated the opposite and 15% had no opinion.

Table 2: Student-stated differences between a blog entry and an essay

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Less formal than essay</th>
<th>Topic choice, format and content more flexible and personal</th>
<th>Shorter/easier than essay</th>
<th>More interesting/fun/motivating</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

62% of the students cited blogging as a more efficient way to improve language skills than traditional essays, while 23% expressed no opinion, and 15% preferred traditional assignments (see Table 3).

Table 3: Blogging vs. traditional assignments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No opinion</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Is writing a blog on a specific topic easier than writing freely?</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is creating a blog a more efficient way to improve language skills than traditional assignments?</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Moreover, peer interaction as one of the main characteristics of blogging was seen as having a motivating effect on students. 48% claimed that comments helped them improve the quality of their blogs, and 53% stated that this feedback motivated them to improve their writing skills (see Table 4).

Table 4: The effects of receiving comments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Are comments helping you improve the quality of your blog?</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No opinion</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Is this kind of feedback motivating you to improve your writing skills?</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>No opinion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Finally, the students’ overall opinions about the activity revealed another interesting fact. Rather than being simply a tool to improve language skills, blogging was viewed primarily as a way of experimenting with different types of media, illustrated by the detailed rating included in Table 5.
Table 5: Students’ opinions on the overall benefits of blogging

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Opinion</th>
<th>Likert Scale (1=strongly agree; 2=agree; 3=no opinion; 4=disagree; 5=strongly disagree)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Creating a blog is a good way to experiment with different types of media</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creating a blog is a good opportunity to start a research activity</td>
<td>2.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creating a blog is a useful tool to share ideas in cyberspace</td>
<td>2.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creating a blog is a more efficient way to improve language skills than traditional assignments</td>
<td>2.38</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To conclude the pilot phase, we included in Survey 3 (question 4) one multiple-choice question where students had to select from a list based on pros and cons categories the answer that best characterized their experience. Blogging was clearly recognized by the respondents as a useful way to improve writing skills, whilst being time-consuming. Most surprisingly, 13% of answers described the project as ‘self-oriented’ rather than ‘based on community spirit’ (see Table 6).

Table 6: Students’ final description of the blog project

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Useful to improve writing skills</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time-consuming</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centred on reading and writing</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-oriented</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rewarding</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exciting</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centred on grammar</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not useful to improve writing skills</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boring</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Based on community spirit</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To understand this trend further we analysed the open-ended questions on ‘disliked’ and ‘liked’ aspects of blogging (Survey 3, 5 and 6) from which a list was created. On top of the list was the time-consuming aspect of blogging (35% of the answers), the necessity to vary content on every post (18%) and the vagueness of requirements...
during the project (15%). Students also stated that they liked blogging, mainly because it enabled them to learn and research a specific topic (35%), it promoted creativity and independent research (22%), and it allowed flexibility in the choice of topic and media.

5. Discussion

This study is part of an ongoing research project initiated in the second semester of 2011; the data analysis presented in this paper is preliminary, but still very informative.

The level of engagement and motivation shown by the students in maintaining a blog in the foreign language they were learning at university varied throughout the semester. Overall, however, they felt motivated by the blogging task as part of language learning activities.

Although motivation was affected by time availability and resources (Normand-Marconnet and Cordella 2012), students emphasized that blogging gave them a flexibility that is absent from pen and paper activities. The plasticity in their compositions came mainly from the extra sources (e.g. texts, visual, oral) that blogging allows and these stimuli may have been responsible for their overall improvement. This indicates that students are employing and developing multifaceted skills through blogging, however some extra help may be needed to further their research skills in order to improve cognitive abilities and language learning.

Churchill concluded from his use of blogs with postgraduate students at Hong Kong University that the “students appeared to agree that the facilitator’s blogging activity encouraged them to blog” (2011: 152). We agree that for the overall success of the activity the language instructor’s participation in and commitment to blogging are paramount. In our view the motivation of students will be compromised if language instructors take a less supportive approach. Online contributors tend to feel more engaged when they get some prompt feedback.

There are some limitations that we should address and avoid in future projects. Although the focus of this pilot project was on the implementation of a digital medium in language teaching and learning, we still utilized the traditional ‘pen and paper’ approach to conduct our surveys and provide language instructors’ feedback. In the future, these instruments will be set up securely online to comply with the virtual learning environment which is now in use in our university.

We should also revisit the percentage allocated to blogging in a foreign language. It might be that 20% is too little for the complex task at hand. Finally, an analysis of the students’ writing skills as they develop over the course of a semester may throw some light on the role of blogging in enhancing these skills.
6. Concluding remarks

This project gave us the opportunity to combine a pedagogical approach and research. We believe that the results can assist in developing a teaching model suitable for implementation in many different languages. It is our wish that, once implemented, it can be sustained over time and create a blogging community for students doing languages at an advanced level.

In spite of the positive aspects of blogging, we concur with Kerawalla et al. (2009) and Latour (2005) that the implementation of a new technology per se can make people less critical of its disadvantages and be adopted purely on the basis of its contemporary nature.

We stress that new technology, whatever may be in vogue at the time, is not necessarily a panacea for the hard work of language teaching and learning. Rather, it should be utilized as a platform where different teaching methods and approaches can come together and be regularly assessed for the advancement of language learning.

Notes

1. Over twenty-five years’ experience between us.
2. This project is funded by the LCL Innovative Teaching and Learning Grant at Monash University, round 1, 2011 and has a Human Ethics approval (CF11/2004 – 2011001135).

Our most sincere thanks go to all the students and language instructors who agreed to be involved in the project. We thank Cecilia Kokubu for her practical assistance and Meredith Sherlock for her fruitful feedback. We also thank Dr Miriam Schcolnik who was a Visiting Research Fellow in the School of Languages, Cultures and Linguistics at Monash University at the beginning of 2011. Miriam opened our eyes to the educational benefits of online platforms and worked closely with us in the writing of the students’ unit guide. We would like also to thank LCNAU reviewers for their constructive feedback.

3. The result obtained in the category ‘equally motivated’ is ambiguous because it is unclear whether students were originally motivated or not. An alternative questions should be designed in future surveys.

References


Appendix A
Student Survey 1 (pre-blogging survey)

1. Do you know what a ‘blog’ is?
2. Do you already have your own blog?
3. If yes, for what reasons did you create your own blog (for personal, academic, professional reasons)?
4. Do you have your own personal website?
5. In your opinion, what is the difference between a blog and a personal web site?
6. What do you think the purpose of using a blog in a foreign language class is?
7. What kind of difficulties do you expect to encounter in using this medium? (Identify 3).
8. Are you motivated by this project?
9. Do you think that the instructions given in the general meeting are clear enough and helpful to meet the requirements of this task?
10. If no, what additional help would you like from the lecturers/language instructors?

Appendix B
Student Survey 2 (mid-semester survey)

1. Have you had any difficulties in creating your blog on Blogger?
2. If yes, what kind of difficulties have you encountered? Please rate from 1 to 5 by crossing (technical aspects, language aspects, time management, comments - to judge and to be judged-, sources- finding interesting, relevant, etc. sources-, topic choice, motivation, other).
3. What is the difference for you between writing a blog entry/comment and writing an essay in a foreign language?
4. Do you think that developing a blog on a specific topic is easier than writing freely?
5. Are comments (from other students and lecturers) helping you to improve the quality of your blog?
6. Is this kind of feedback (comments on entries) motivating you to improve your writing skills?
7. A blog assignment is more efficient to improve writing skills than a traditional assignment, e.g. essay. (1= strongly agree; 2= agree; 3= no opinion; 4= disagree; 5= strongly disagree).
8. Creating and developing a blog on a specific topic related to the foreign language learned is a useful tool to share ideas with others in cyberspace. (1= strongly agree; 2= agree; 3= no opinion; 4= disagree; 5= strongly disagree).
9. Creating and developing a blog on a specific topic related to the foreign language learned is a good opportunity to start a research activity. (1= strongly agree; 2= agree; 3= no opinion; 4= disagree; 5= strongly disagree).
10. Creating and developing a blog on a specific topic related to the foreign language
learned is a good way to experiment with various types of media. (1= strongly agree; 2= agree; 3= no opinion; 4= disagree; 5= strongly disagree).

11. Identify 2 positive and 2 negative aspects about the blog.
12. Are you motivated by blogging?

Appendix C
Student Survey 3 (end-semester survey)

1. What kind of difficulties have you encountered? Please rate from 1 to 5 by crossing (technical aspects, language aspects, time management, comments - to judge and to be judged-, sources- finding interesting, relevant, etc. sources-, topic choice, motivation, other).
2. How long did you spend writing an entry or a comment (average time): less than 15 min;15 to 30 min; 30 to 45 min; 45 to 60 min; more than 60 min.
3. How long did you spend researching before writing an entry (average time): less than 15 min;15 to 30 min; 30 to 45 min; 45 to 60 min; more than 60 min.
4. How would you describe this project: exciting; boring; time-consuming; rewarding; useful to improve writing skills; useless to improve writing skills; centred on reading and writing; centred on grammar; self-oriented; based on community spirit; other (positive); other (negative).
5. What did you dislike about the project?
6. What did you enjoy?
7. Do you think to have met the requirements of the language task?
8. If yes or no, why?
9. How did you feel about other students commenting on your blog?
10. How did you feel about blogging in the foreign language? More motivated than at the beginning of the semester; equally motivated; less motivated.
11. Are you intending to continue blogging after the end of the semester?
12. Do you have any suggestions to improve the project?

Have you any additional comments or suggestions?