LEARNING CULTURE THROUGH BLOGGING

Nadine Normand-Marconnet  
(nadine.normandmarconnet@monash.edu)  
Monash University, Australia

Marisa Cordella  
(marisa.cordella@monash.edu)  
Monash University, Australia

Abstract

How to teach culture to L2 learners it is still a hot debate in Australia. In this context, we studied 158 Spanish and French intermediate language learners maintaining a blog in their target language over a 12 week period and identified their main views on the blogging experience. Preliminary results highlighted students’ lack of awareness of increased cultural exposure and knowledge acquired by accessing a series of digital materials related to their selected topic. To investigate further, we categorised students into two main groups (i.e. below and above the B1 level of CEFR\(^1\)). Their perceptions of cultural gains were recorded and analysed by collecting i) students’ surveys during the semester, ii) students’ reflections on the blog experience completed at the end of semester, iii) students’ views on the overall unit. A triangulation of this data was made by investigating how a representative sample of students belonging to these two groups differ in selection and in utilisation of resources employed in their blogs throughout the semester. We argue that although students’ surveys may not reveal that students are learning about the target culture, the richness of their blogs’ content shows the contrary.

1 Introduction

Today, multimedia tasks have become an essential part of everyday life. At the same time, the utilisation of new technological tools in teaching a foreign language has been a well-established practice throughout the last decades. Currently, the interest focuses on online platforms that facilitate students’ engagement with a wider social network (Godwin-Jones, 2008). Without a doubt, as an extension of Web 1.0 and Computer Mediated Communication (CMC), web 2.0 provides motivating learning environments including a wide range of intuitive and user-friendly digital tools. Easier to develop and maintain than websites, weblogs (now called blogs) and wikis are perfect examples of these kind of dynamic and process-oriented tools which supply a space where “the reader is a potential contributor” (Alm, 2006).

2 Background of our study

\(^1\) Common European Framework of Reference
The application of blogs in education has become increasingly popular from the early 2000s and the term of “edublog” appeared for the first time in 2002 with the creation of Edublog Webring, a platform initiated by a community of teachers, technologists, librarians etc. interested in integrating weblogs into their practices (http://ringsurf.com/ring/edublog). The term “edublog” is often used to describe blogs whose main objective is to support the teaching-learning process within the educational context (Duran, 2011).

Whatever the name is, recent empirical studies show that blogging can be a tool used to support learning and teaching (Churchill, 2011). Blogging provides opportunity for peer-group commentary, can assist students (Churchill, 2009; Kerawalla et al., 2009), and is largely used in training future professionals in journalism or education (Camilleri et al., 2007). Blogging offers an up-to-date learning medium and a pedagogical alternative to assist the development of writing skills (Pinkman, 2005; Rivers Mompean, 2010, Warschauer, 2010) and the production of original work which can be shared and further developed in collaboration with others (Pinkman, 2005; Prichard, 2008; Sun, 2009). The exchange of information and comments with peers has been shown to be beneficial and a motivating factor for language learners (Absalom & De Saint Leger, 2011; Pinkman, 2005; Sun, 2009; Yang & Chang, 2011).

In foreign language classrooms, the increased use of blogging is sustained by its “authentic, interesting and communicate nature” (Ho, 2009). Empirical research is developing rapidly and numerous surveys are now available on blogging mostly in English as a Second Language (Ward, 2004; Rivers Mompean, 2010; Yang, 2009), but also in various languages, e.g. French and Spanish (Dompmartin-Normand, 2008; Lee, 1998; Normand-Marconnet & Cordella, 2012), Vietnamese (Ho, 2009), Korean (Lee, 2006), etc. Following socio-constructivist approaches, recent research clearly evidences the benefits of blogging in terms of project-based learning, critical thinking, ownership of learning, active participation in a community of practices, social presence and interactivity (Ferdig & Trammel, 2004; Ducate & Lomicka, 2005; Richardson, 2006; Murray & Hourigan, 2008). From this, we can see that the benefits of blogging are often analysed in terms of foreign language learners’ cognitive development or in terms of improving language proficiency.

The enhancement of cultural learning however seems currently under-researched. While Levy (2007) proposes an innovative framework based on the analysis of five projects which emphasize the positive relationship between cultural learning and new technologies (i.e. emails, chat, forum and web-based projects), blogs are cited as “emerging applications[which] may also prove for culture learning” (p.122). Actually, only few studies are available on this topic: Ducat and Lomicka (2005) have conducted a project in which blogs were used to document target culture travel and to encourage critical thinking about the target culture (French and German) among American students. In their project involving Spanish learners, Jones and Nuhfer-Halso (2006) promoted blogs as an efficient tool to enhance both language production and cultural awareness. In the study abroad context, Elola and Oskoz (2008) also reported on the role of blogging in fostering intercultural competence development.

The rationale of our project was to identify a potential relationship between the students’ exposure to blogs as a specific digital medium, and the improvement of their language learning experience. In regard to cultural knowledge, the main aim of our study was relatively limited: we proposed one list of common topics (food, literature, history, popular culture, etc.)
as the basis for the students’ blogs. As per the terminology used by Lustig and Koester to analyse intercultural competence (2010), the aim was to enable them to gain “cultural information” on the most visible part of culture (commonly called “big C culture”) by being exposed to authentic material in the foreign language. According to our timeframe, we presumed that the “cultural patterns” (i.e. norms, beliefs, values and social practice collectively shared, also usually designed by “little c culture”) would be difficult to evidence. Nevertheless, we were convinced that the development of Intercultural Communicative Competence as defined by Byram (1997), whilst not being the primary target could be a positive side-effect of our project. In accordance with Ducate & Lomicka (2008) and Elola & Oskoz regarding the “third place” concept proposed by Kramsch, we think that blogging is enabling the creation of a “sphere of interculturality” (1993, p.205): to design and maintain their blogs, our students were supposed to be regularly exposed to the target culture through the online papers, websites, videos etc. they visited and possibly used as references. This could trigger a self-reflection on both native and foreign language and culture and enhance their cultural understanding of the target culture.

2 Design of the study

Our blog project was launched at Monash University, Australia in Semester 2, 2011 in the quest to respond to both pedagogical and research questions. This research is part of a longitudinal study (2011-2013) across language programs in the School of Languages, Cultures and Linguistics. A template was designed in the first year of the project for both French and Spanish classes, tested in 2011 and polished in 2012. The main emphasis of this manuscript will be the analysis of the data obtained in 2011. We plan to introduce the revised template to other programs in the European and Asian Studies Program 2. The template basically highlights the requirements needed to be followed by each student and the marking criteria used to assess each entry post. Students’ and language instructors’ feedback and personal observations have been pivotal to improve the initial template.

Regarding the pedagogical aspect of our project, Spanish and French students enrolled in the second semester of 2011 were asked to select a topic from a list of 25 items (see Appendix A) and write 8 entries of 80 words minimum in the target language during the 12 week program. Language instructors were central to students’ blog experience by assisting them in their writing expression and consolidating the linguistic elements that shape descriptive, narrative, expository and argumentative texts while also highlighting those features that make those genres different from one another. A total of 20% of the overall mark for the unit was allocated to the blog activity; the remaining 80% comprised other language and cultural activities strengthening oral and aural skills.

The research part of our project was based on three surveys and a focus group conducted in 2011. The aim was to investigate the potential relationship between the students’ exposure to blogging as a digital media, and the improvement of their language experience. Questions were designed as: yes/no, multiple choice, free writing segments, and statement-type items.

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2 The areas of study are: Asian Studies, Chinese Studies, English as an International Language, French Studies, German Studies, Indonesian Studies, Italian Studies, Japanese Studies, Korean Studies, Modern Greek Studies, Slavic Studies, Spanish and Latin American Studies and Ukrainian Studies.
scored on a five point Likert scale (1= strongly agree; 2= agree; 3= no opinion; 4= disagree; 5= strongly disagree). Result showed that blogging was considered by both students and language instructors as an efficient way to increase students’ engagement and language skills, and to a lesser degree to improve their research skills. The notion of the acquisition of cultural knowledge and intercultural competence did not emerge in the students’ surveys raising an interest in finding out why this was the case.

Language and culture are intimately connected and while we may have assumed that the resources students utilised were giving them a certain degree of cultural knowledge and intercultural competence, nevertheless the students’ surveys did not reveal this. Therefore, it was our purpose to identify what resources students utilised and to associate these resources with their overall achievement for the blog component. This would help us to identify whether there was any correlation between resources utilised in the target language and blog performance as well as whether there was a link between cultural awareness and students’ reflections on the blogging experience.

2.1 Participants

Overall, the 2011 project involved 158 students, 6 language instructors and 2 language coordinators. Student participants were enrolled in Spanish and/or French programs at B1 and B2 levels, at Monash University, Australia. The cohort was composed of 100 French students (89 females and 21 males) and 58 Spanish learners (47 females and 11 males). Students were between 20-24 years old, with one student being in his 60s. The language instructors’ cohort was formed by 5 females (3 in Spanish and 2 in French) and 1 male (in French). Having different backgrounds and experience, language instructors were trained to mark students’ blogs following a prescribed marking grid, and to assist students in the setting up of the blog. They also provided additional educational help when required. In addition, the language coordinators in the Spanish and French programs (the authors of the manuscript) conducted weekly meetings with the language instructors to oversee the development of the project and minor adjustments were introduced when the need arose. The coordinators were not involved in the teaching of the units during the semester to prevent interference with the dataset.

Following the students’ performance during the semester, the students were categorised into two main groups, those whose language proficiency was below B1 (group 1) level of CEFR and those whose language proficiency was at B1 level (group 2). From this, we selected a representative sample by taking into account the marks the students had obtained during the semester in the blog component. The analysis in this study was based on the top sixteen highest marks (ten in French and six in Spanish corresponding to 10% of students involved in each class, marks from 18,2/20 to 19,6/20) and the bottom sixteen lowest marks (from 3,8/20 to 12,6/20). In order to minimise as much as possible the component of subjectivity in the assessment process a marking grid was designed and monitored to increase the chances of consistency between languages and among language instructors’ marking criteria (see Appendix B). The present analysis will focus on the larger cohort of students (158) and the selected groups when appropriate.

2.2 Instruments and procedure
In this manuscript we investigate students’ perceptions of cultural gains which were recorded and analysed by collecting i) students’ surveys during the semester, ii) students’ reflections on the blog experience completed at the end of semester, iii) students’ views on the overall unit. In addition, we analyse in detail the content of the 16 selected blogs in each group (below and above level B1 of the CEFR) in terms of the selection and utilization of resources employed in their blogs throughout the semester. It is presumed that the triangulation of the data may expand our understanding of the overall student attitudes and knowledge about the conceptualisation of culture.

2.3 Data collection

2.3.1 Students’ surveys during the semester

From the three surveys conducted during the semester, we extracted data enabling us to get insights into students’ views on the relationship between blogging and a potential gain in linguistics and cultural knowledge.

In the mid-survey (survey 2, see Appendix C) students were asked to respond to the following statements by ranking their level of satisfaction on a scale from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree): (a) a blog assignment is more efficient to improve writing skills than a traditional assignment, e.g. essay; (b) a blog is a useful tool to share ideas with others in cyberspace; (c) creating and developing a blog on a specific topic related to the foreign language learned is a good opportunity to start a research activity; (d) 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 (questions 7 to 10).

In the end-survey (survey 3), they had to estimate the time spent on blogging for both writing and research activities (questions 2 and 3). They were also requested to identify three enjoyable aspects of blogging (question 6).

2.3.2 Students’ views on the overall unit

Following Monash University procedure, students were invited to fill out an on-line survey at the end of the semester in order to provide feedback for the teaching and running of the unit. Following a qualitative approach we identified only those comments that made reference to blogging.

2.3.3 Students’ reflections on the blog experience completed at the end of semester

Students were asked to write a reflective post in either English or the target language at the end of the unit. This was done after they had been maintaining their personal blog for over 11 weeks.
2.3.4 Students’ utilisation of resources employed throughout their semester long blog entries

Since there was not a framework available which could encompass both linguistic elements in the students’ entry posts and the content value of the blog, we decided to identify all the resources the students utilised and showcased in their blogs.

The following elements were analysed quantitatively for each post composing the blog: the number of words; number of sources, images, links, videos, audio material used in L1 and L2. In addition, we recorded: the number of posts completed during the semester, comments and replies given to other posts, and the reflective post.

3 Research questions

1. How do our students perceive the potential gain of cultural knowledge provided by blogging?
2. What does make a good blog in the target language?
3. Regarding a potential increase in cultural knowledge through blogging, is there a correlation between our students’ perceptions and their blogging performance?

4 Results

4.1 Students’ surveys during the semester

Overall, 117 students completed the mid-survey questionnaire. The answers to questions 7 to 10 indicate that the level of agreement with the four proposed statements varies slightly between the “strongly agree” and “agree” categories (on a Likert scale from 1=strongly agree to 5=strongly disagree). Interestingly, blogging was viewed primarily as a way of experimenting with different media (1.8). Our students were also likely to agree on the fact that blogging promotes research activity (2.02) and enables the sharing of ideas in cyberspace (2.07). Finally, they didn’t show strong agreement with the fact that maintaining a blog should be a more efficient way to improve writing skills compared to traditional essays (2.38).

At the end of the semester, 120 students participated in survey 3. They were asked in questions 2 and 3 to estimate the time they spent on writing their posts and on researching to elaborate the content of their blogs. As can be seen in Table 1, the majority of students spent between 30 and 60 minutes writing each post, and between 15 and 45 minutes researching. Detailed figures suggest a lower engagement in the research activity itself, nevertheless, the average amount of time dedicated to blogging is impressive and can be seen as a strong indicator of motivation (see Normand-Marconnet and Cordella, 2012).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1. Estimated time spent on blogging (writing and research)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>research</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As illustrated in Table 2, information gathered in the open-ended question 5 has been clustered into eleven categories (including the non-answers). The most significant results show that a third of our students found that learning and researching a specific topic was the most enjoyable aspect of our project. Nearly a quarter of them appreciated the opportunity to complete a creative task combined with a research activity; 10% liked the flexibility given in terms of topic selection and media choice. To a lesser degree, improvement of language proficiency and interaction provided by blogging were also mentioned.

Table 2. Enjoyable aspects of blogging identified by students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>n=120</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Learning/researching topic</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creativity/independent research</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flexibility of topic and media choices</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improving/experimenting with language</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final outcome</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working regularly on the same project</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fun and motivating</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Everything</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No answer</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.2 Students’ views on the overall unit

Out of 58 Spanish student responses in the overall unit assessment, 18 made comments on how to improve the blog activity but did not make a reference to cultural gains. In French Studies, 41 out of 100 students also placed emphasis on the areas that needed improvement and rarely mentioned the language and cultural gains. Only 4 comments refer to language mainly in the improvement of vocabulary and language learning and 3 comments refer to culture. We present two examples below.

Example 1 (French anonymous 2011)
‘The best aspects of the unit are learning new vocabulary and learning about French culture’

Example 2 (French anonymous 2011) ‘The Blog program, very interesting and useful for language learning’

4.3 Students’ reflections on the blog experience completed at the end of semester

To complete their blog, students were requested to write a reflective post in English or in the target language favouring the language skills they had gained in the process of blogging. From the whole cohort, only 107 students completed the reflection post (see Table 3): 77 of them were from the French group and 30 from the Spanish group. A primary analysis
conducted with Nvivo9 Software show that students seldom made reference (0.53%) to the word “culture”.

Table 3. Instances of the word “culture” in the dataset composed of reflective posts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Posts</th>
<th>Words</th>
<th>“Culture”</th>
<th>Coverage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>French reflective posts written in French</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>3963</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>0.16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French reflective posts written in English</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>11082</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0.24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spanish reflective posts written in Spanish</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1819</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.06%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spanish reflective posts written in English</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>5629</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.07%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>22493</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>0.53%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Since the term ‘culture’ did not emerge in the data as expected, we conducted an analysis of the discourse for the sample groups 1 and 2. We decided to leave “culture” as a theme and identify any other theme which could emerge too. The following terms emerged in the reflective posts: language, culture, resource and research. As shown in Table 4, students in Group 1 in both language groups showed limited participation in this task. None of the Spanish students completed the reflective posts and the 5 French students who did, mentioned language and research in similar proportion, but did not comment on resources and research. On the other hand, both Spanish and French students in group 2 completed the reflective post and made more references to language than to the rest of the themes. Learning new vocabulary and consolidating syntactical structures was recurrent in the data.

Table 4. Results of discourse analysis on the themes related to “culture” in the reflective posts of group 1 and group 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spanish 1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French 1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spanish 2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French 2</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In addition to this analysis, the following diagram generated by Nvivo9 clearly illustrates the association of the word ‘culture’ made in the French and English reflective post dataset. Culture is associated with food, music, current affairs, society and overall appreciation of the way of living.

3 The spelling of the word ‘culture’ is the same in English and French. The term ‘cultura’ (Spanish spelling) was also utilised but it was only used once directly by one student.
To capture students’ view on blogging and the reference they made to language and culture, we reproduce the following example from the Spanish dataset.

**Example 3 (Spanish anonymous 2011)**

“Overall I enjoyed the blogging experience and feel that my ability to write in Spanish has improved, especially the ability to summarize an article and give my opinion about it. I feel I have acquired more of my own ‘voice’ when writing in Spanish. I also feel I learned a great deal about the Drug Wars in Latin America, a topic I previously had little knowledge about. Thus, creating and maintaining this blog has not only bettered my written language skills, but has developed my understanding of an important issue in Latin America. I also enjoyed reading the blog of another student (‘The Exportation of Animals’) and commenting on her entries, as well as reading the comments made about my entries…”

There is a clear emphasis on the improvement of writing skills leading students to find their own voice when communicating ideas in the target language.

**4.4 Students’ utilisation of resources employed throughout their semester long blog entries**

The comparison between the selected blogs in the acquired B1 group and the selected blogs maintained by students who were below B1 level enables us to emphasize some quantitative tendencies as potential criteria of blogs performance. In the first instance, it appears that the
overall length of the blogs in group 1 is higher than that of group 2. Figures show that the group 1 blogs include a smaller quantity of words than group 2, with a respective mean of 186 words per post against 257 in the second one. The same discrepancy in terms of word quantity exists for reflective posts, since 148 words are used on average in group 1, compared to 274 in group 2. There is no big difference in terms of comments received (since this task was considered compulsory), but the amount of replies in group 2 is three times the number in group 1. Finally, the visual enrichment of the group 1 blogs seems lower than the group 2 blogs, with a total amount of 69 images (pictures, graphs, maps, etc.) against 147. Other embedded items (sources, links, videos) are also fewer in group 1 (102) than in group 2 (206). In this category of criteria, students preferred using and sharing items in the target language (64% of the total amount of items) more than in English (only 36%). Nevertheless, the weight of resources in the target language is far more important in group 2 (142 items against 55 in group 1).

Table 5. Blogs’ content characteristics for group 1 and group 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Group 1 (16 blogs)</th>
<th>Group 2 (16 blogs)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Posts</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Words in posts</td>
<td>18784</td>
<td>33859</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Optional reflective posts</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Words in reflective posts</td>
<td>888</td>
<td>4381</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comments received</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Replies given to comments</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Images</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embedded items in L1 (English)</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embedded items in L2 (French/Spanish)</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5 Discussion

Our data analysis of both the qualitative and quantitative data provides meaningful results in terms of links between blogging and learning culture.

As per our results, the first research question is addressed significantly. Overall, it must be noted that students’ attitudes on blogging are less language-oriented than we expected. The importance of cultural knowledge vs. language proficiency can be traced in the way our students portrayed their blogging activity: the data collected through questionnaires show that the benefits in terms of language proficiency are well balanced by the positive aspects of blogging on research skills. The time they spent on researching sources for their posts and the fact that the combination between writing and researching on a specific topic was considered as the most enjoyable aspects of the project, can be viewed as an indirect acknowledgement of acquiring knowledge of the target culture. As demonstrated by Lee (1998), it is presumed that the exposure to up-to-date authentic foreign language material “facilitates [students'] understanding of cultural phenomena including both products and perspectives of the target culture” (p.105). Along with Ducate & Lomicka (2005), we also argue that, when students possibly accessed blogs maintained by native speakers in the target language, they “can gain
the insider’s perspective on various cultural topics, thus leading to better understanding of other cultures and what shapes them” (p.413).

To analyse what makes a good blog in the target language is a more difficult question to address. The detailed analyses of the blogs in our top-ten students from group 2 show that the content of the blogs was not only good in terms of language proficiency, but also in terms of the diversity of embedded items in the foreign language as sources. This can be interpreted as a possible shift for these students from a “view of culture which is static and distant, to a view which is more dynamic and directly engaged” (Levy, 2007, p.108). Nevertheless, it must be admitted that the assessment of the quality and the accuracy of cultural components in our students’ blogs remained a difficult, if not to say impossible task. While existing criteria for language proficiency are various and abundant, we could not access any accurate framework for cultural components in blogs. Our attempt to use quantitative criteria (number of words, number of sources in foreign language, etc.) is not completely satisfactory. Indeed, we feel that these objective elements of appreciation are insufficient to evaluate (a) the exposure to L2 culture through authentic material (b) the impact of this exposure in terms of a possible gain in cultural knowledge and improvement of intercultural competence.

Finally, our findings tend to prove that there is no obvious correlation between our students’ perceptions and their blogging performance. In other words, in our study, students do not usually reflect on the cultural gains they experience, through the digital material they are exposed while maintaining a blog in a target language. Those students who were in acquired B1 substantially employed more resources (e.g. images, embedded items), wrote nearly twice as many words and provided nearly five times more reflections on their blogging experiences than those below B1. Nevertheless reference to the word ‘culture’ was limited, giving preference to language learning. Doing research and looking for resources to sustain a view point is an opportunity to get involved with the target culture. As mentioned above, this assumption was implicit in the questionnaire results, but not confirmed by the discourse analysis done on the reflective posts. In both groups, students did not appreciate this aspect and placed emphasis on the acquisition of the new vocabulary and practice of syntactical structures. Without doubt, this apparent paradox is worthy of future investigations.

6 Limitation and concluding remarks

As previously mentioned, the primary target of our blog project was the enhancement of our students’ writing skills, whereas the furthering of cultural understanding was not made obvious. The absence of clear guidance on selecting, citing and using references in the target language is a limitation on our study. Students obviously learn more about the target culture even by reading and listening to material in English, but the exposure to authentic material in the target language remains the best way to foster cultural understanding as demonstrated in studies previously mentioned.

Moreover, due to time constraints, our blog analysis should be completed by a detailed discourse analysis of the totality of the posts, and not to be limited to reflective posts only. Using quantitative criteria to assess the blog performance is like to stay at the surface level, whereas extracting data from the whole content of the blog as a more holistic approach would surely give us deeper insights of a potential gain in terms of cultural knowledge. We realized
that the next step of our study should be the detailed analysis of what our students said in their blog on their selected topic and how they said it (e.g. by evidencing stereotypes).

Finally, the low level of interaction evidenced by a limited number of comments and replies in our blog samples is another issue: 12 replies out of 50 comments in group 1 and 36 replies out of 59 comments have been recorded, and unfortunately all this was done by classmates, without any participation from external bloggers. This low level of exchanges illustrates not only a relative failure in terms of collaborative learning allegedly provided by blogging, but also a lack of opportunity to improve intercultural communicative competence by interacting with native speakers. In our project, where blogging was conceived as a pedagogical activity, the issue of spontaneous vs. forced interactions through comments and replies is difficult to address. In the future, one solution could be to provide our students with a list of identified native speakers maintaining blogs on the same topic as their own in order to encourage potential discussions. Nevertheless, due to the intense competition with other social media like Facebook or Twitter which are today incredibly popular among our students, this solution may be not rewarding.

In conclusion, if language and culture are intimately connected then why are students not aware that they are being exposed to and learning about a new culture through the exposure to digital media? Do we, as language instructors, have a responsibility to make culture more prominent in our language curriculum? It may be the case that some considerations should be taken into account for future language culture programs utilising blogs. Students should be made aware that the exercise involves both a language and a cultural component that will enrich their overall language capability and cultural awareness and competence. It is through language that the conceptualisation of culture becomes prominent and students’ exposure to digital material may be an opportunity to provide them with a cultural learning landscape not yet fully explored. The use of resources in the target language and the maintenance of blogs could serve the double purpose of exploring writing skills while engaging in a cultural milieu. Our results clearly show that a successful blog experience in a target language is not solely based on the writing skills displayed by students, but on students’ exposure to and appreciation of cultural material found in the resources available on line.

References


**Appendix A**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Food</th>
<th>Festivals</th>
<th>Cinema</th>
<th>Literature</th>
<th>Culture shock</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Fashion</td>
<td>Politics</td>
<td>Economy</td>
<td>Business</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Society</td>
<td>Customs</td>
<td>Folklore</td>
<td>Music</td>
<td>News</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geography</td>
<td>Natural Disasters</td>
<td>Ecology</td>
<td>Sport</td>
<td>Medical news</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Migration to Australia</td>
<td>Body language</td>
<td>Cross-cultural communication</td>
<td>Science and technology</td>
<td>Other (upon approval)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Appendix B**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rubric for blog evaluation (15% of overall blog mark)</th>
<th>Weight</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ideas and arguments are clear and coherent. You are expected to follow the structure and rules of argumentation learned in class.</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blog posts are thoughtful and show reflection on the topic. You are expected to provide support for any statements you make.</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blog posts reflect comprehension, analysis and critique of sources cited.</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blog posts are ‘clean’ of spelling, capitalization and punctuation mistakes. Do not use the abbreviations you would use in texting.</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The language is comprehensible and consistent. You must remember the aim of your writing is to communicate ideas, therefore, your text must be understandable. For example, you should check for consistency of person, tense, use of determiners and use full sentences.  

The presentation of the blog is original, attractive, and aesthetic. You should pay attention to fonts and colours, add visuals where relevant, choose an interesting layout.  

The blog posts include a variety of resources and media, such as links to other sites, video and audio.  

Reactions to other blogs and replies to response (5% of overall blog mark)  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Weight</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>You have replied to all responses to your posts.</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There are at least 3 responses to another student’s posts.</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Your responses are informed and thoughtful.</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Appendix C

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, 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 D

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, 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 you 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?

13. Have you any additional comments or suggestions?