

Participant summary: Using and supporting a blog for teaching French for professional purposes, by Carolin Schneider (2016)

This research study investigates the use of a blog in the context of a 'French for professional purposes' module, which was taught as an elective module at a UK based university language centre during the academic year of 2015/2016. The module, aimed at undergraduate students with intermediate French language skills, could be taken as part of the university's French degree programme or as an elective module, and was designed to increase students' language and digital skills, also referred to as technology skills, in professional contexts. The purpose of the research undertaken was to gain an insight into the use of blogs and blogging platforms in language learning modules, including impact on motivation and skills development. The research was primarily conducted in order to inform future decisions about the use and required support of blogs in language teaching at this particular language centre, in addition to serving as a case study for other contexts. In order to collect relevant data, questionnaires were administered to the students on the module, and interviews were conducted with the tutor as well as three students. In addition, I kept a reflective diary to chart my own development while supporting the use of the blog.

It was found that the tutor and students developed increased confidence in using a blogging platform during the module, and that they appreciated the increased pace of feedback that developed as result of using the blog. At the same time, I feel that I have developed additional skills in supporting colleagues and students, as well as technical skills, and that a community of practice had been formed.

In conclusion, it was found that blogs may be useful in the context of foreign language teaching and learning, as they appear to motivate and engage students and staff. It is recommended that adequate technical support needs to be made available to the tutor and students, to allow them to develop the necessary skills and confidence to benefit from using tools such as WordPress.

Student surveys and interviews

The figures below outline the main findings, while the research methodology can be found in the full version of this study (link below).

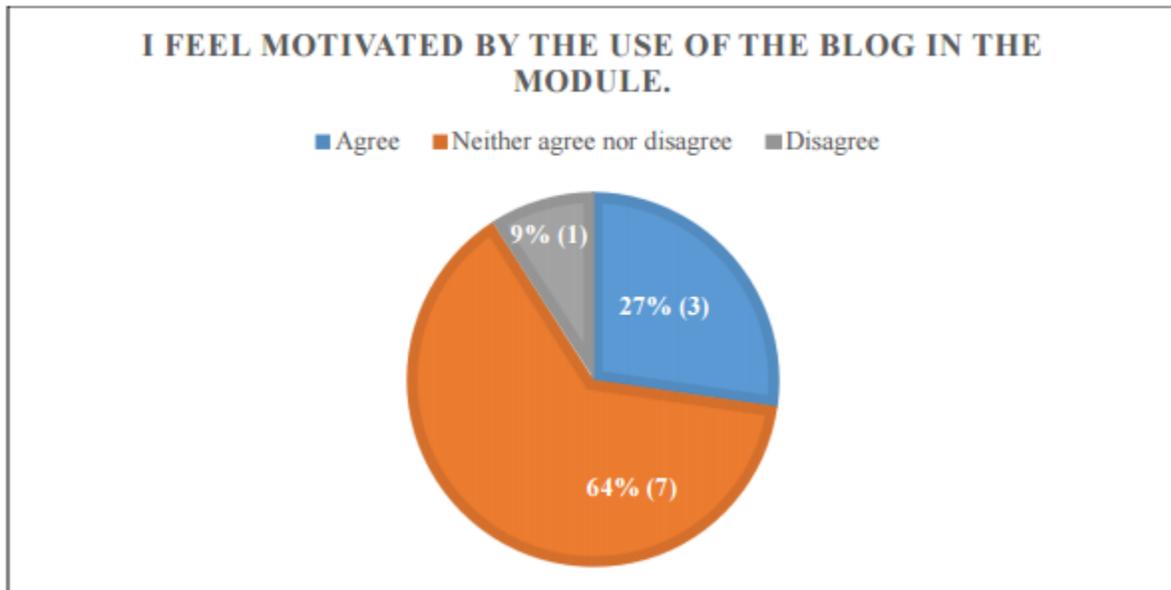


Figure 1: Students' responses in regards to motivation (mid-semester)

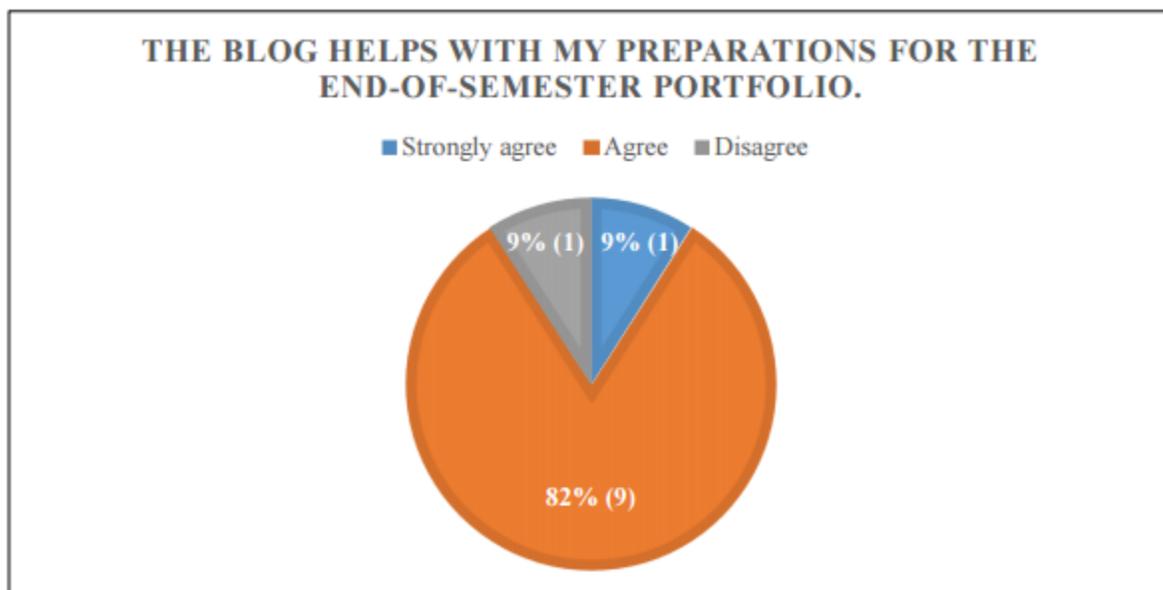


Figure 2: Students' responses in regards to portfolio preparation (mid-semester)

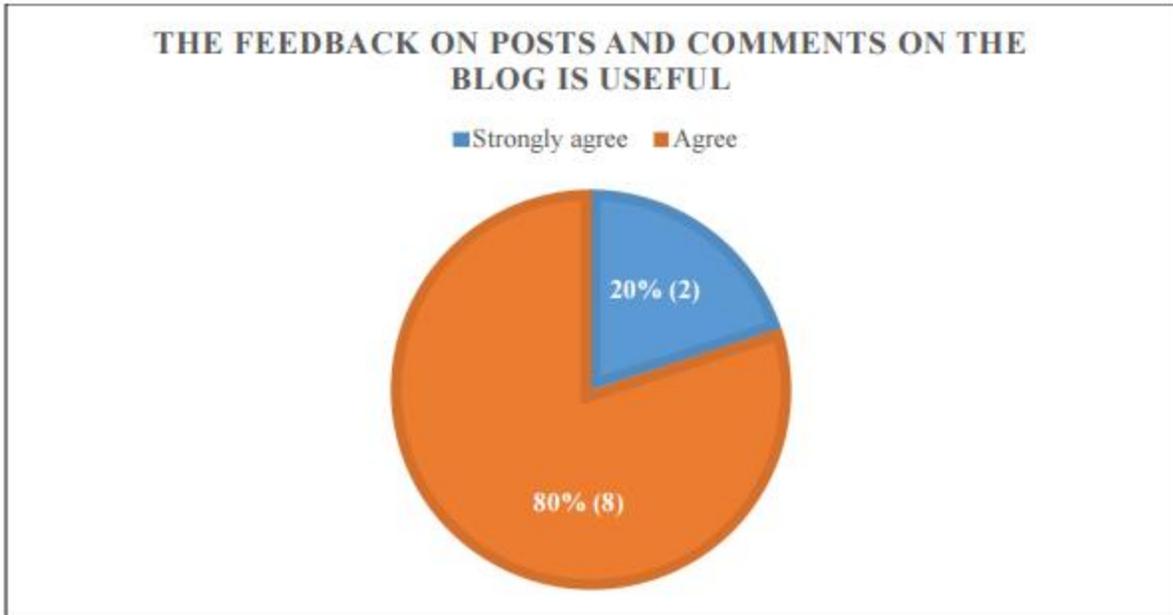


Figure 3: Students' responses in regards to feedback (mid-semester)

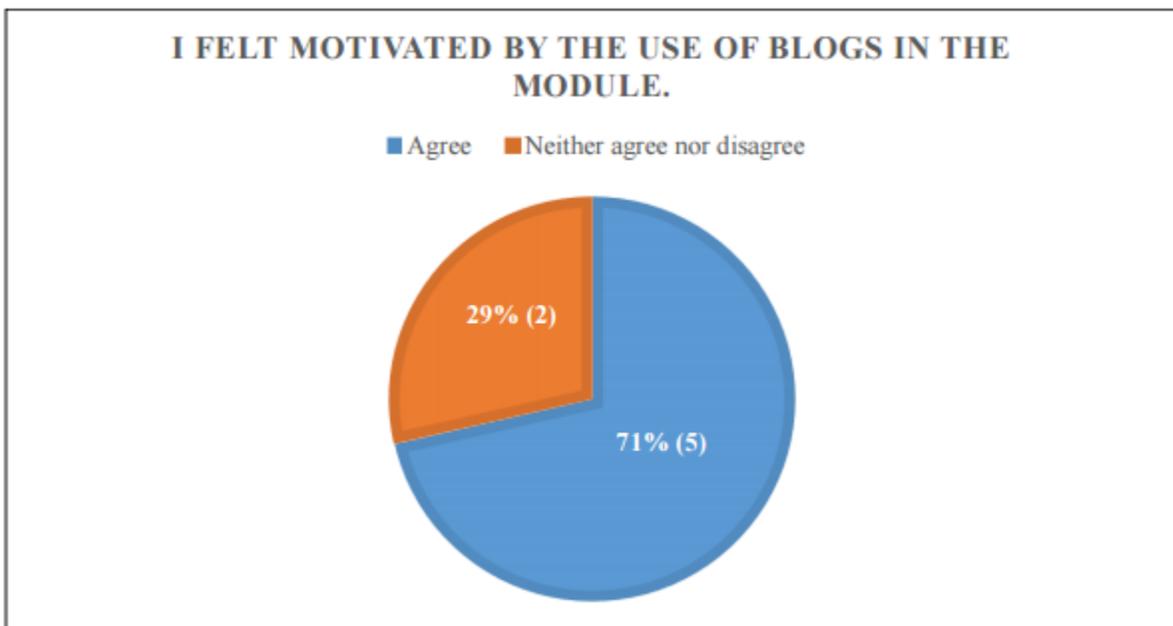


Figure 4: Students' responses in regards to motivation (end of semester)

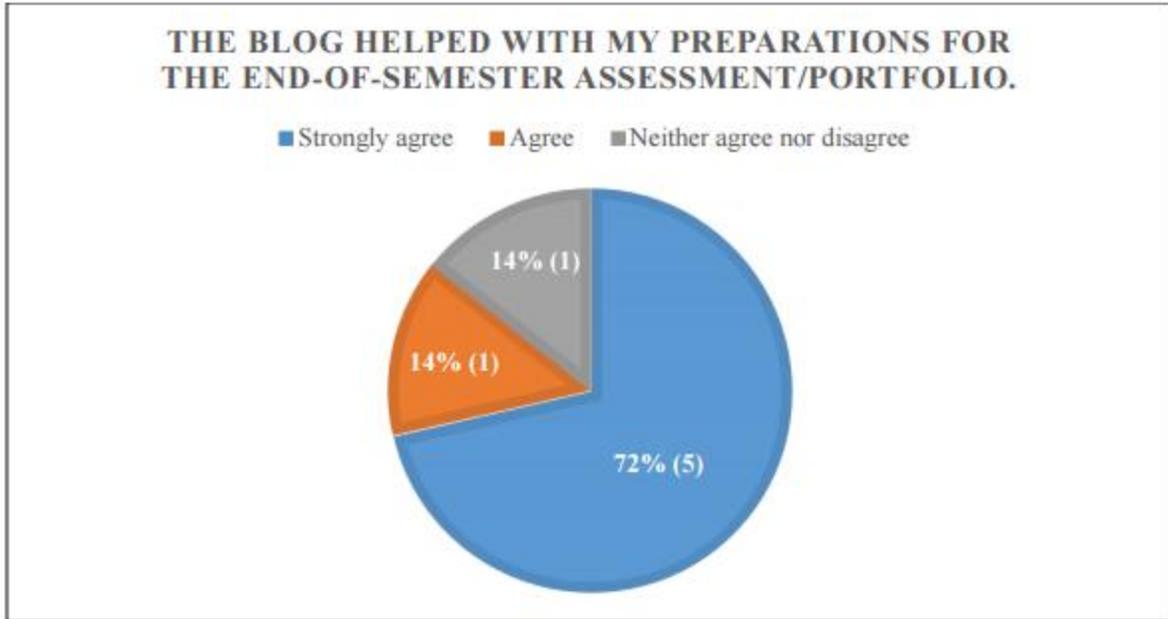


Figure 5: Students' responses in regards to portfolio preparation (end of semester)

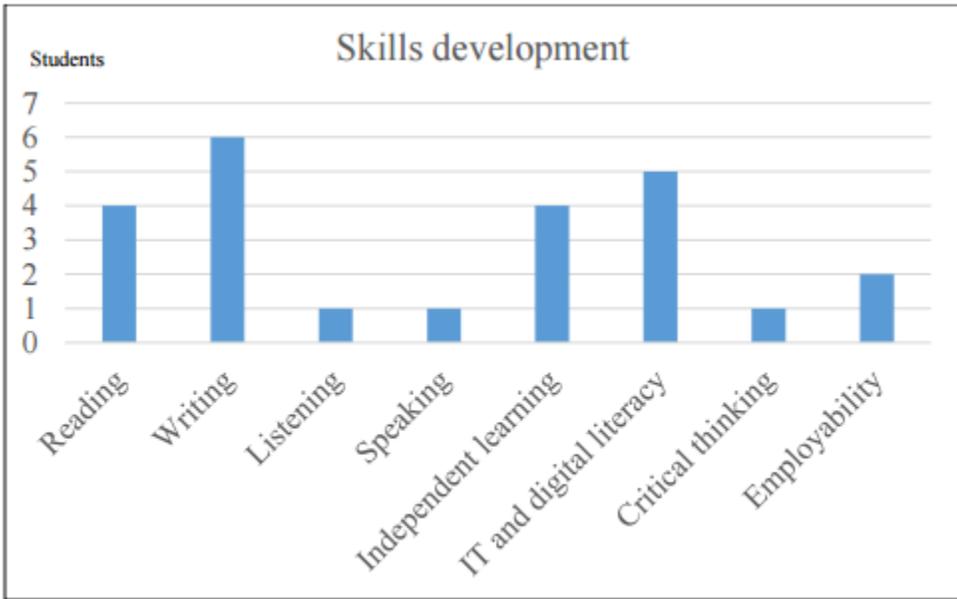


Figure 6: Students' responses in regards to skills development

Tutor surveys and interviews

It was established that at the beginning of the module the tutor possessed basic digital skills, meaning they regularly used tools such as email and social media. It also meant that the tutor was learning about using the blog alongside the students, writing in an email to the department leader in December 2015 that “[a]s I have been learning about blogging alongside them, there there [sic] have been technical issues but not insurmountable. (...) Students have certainly learnt digital skills as well as French (as have I)”. They stressed that this was feasible because students were being assessed on their French language skills rather than use of technology and digital skills, while acknowledging that extensive support was required, for example when “I don’t think it would’ve kept going, you know, at the moment when I had a real dip, when we had the formatting issues and they couldn’t actually publish (...) I don’t think I could’ve dealt with, you know, without support” (Tutor interview 3). One issue that came up several times was the need for ongoing technical support and worries about how this would be maintained at the existing level.

The tutor outlined the need for the development of students’ employability skills, which include digital skills, and the wish to give students the opportunity to develop materials that they could show to employers as part of recruitment processes. It was acknowledged that the tutor’s own lack of skills may influence the pace at which students’ skills developed, acknowledging that “they would be going faster if I could go faster” (Tutor interview 2), but that the pace of the blog appeared to speed up the language learning overall.

The tutor was motivated to use the blog with students because they perceived the institutional Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), Blackboard, as unattractive and “just so slow” (Tutor interview 1). At the same time, the tutor did not think that it noticeably influenced the level of their own engagement during the module. The collaborative aspect of the blog was highlighted as a main motivator for the tutor, and they felt that students were very engaged and motivated to interact with each other. In addition, the collaborative aspect of receiving support from colleagues, and being able to access their input and expertise, was emphasised by the tutor, something that appeared to be missing in other modules. It was stressed that the heightened pace

of feedback and interaction increased the workload for the tutor and students, while offering simplified and quick access to a central learning platform.

The tutor appreciated the support received from colleagues during the development and running of this module. As mentioned above, they were worried about sustaining the existing level of support, especially once I finish this research study and am required to turn my focus onto other projects related to my role as learning resources manager. They also mentioned that better IT skills and more time would be beneficial for teaching this module in the future, explaining that "[i]t's a bit hard for me, because I've got too much on to be kind of learning new tricks now, but you know, I'm learning quite a lot" (Tutor interview 1). The tutor appeared to desire individualised support, and had clear ideas about the materials she required the learning technologist to create. Despite this, there seems to be a disconnect between what is desired and what is delivered, partly because there appear to be assumptions about audience needs, meaning that the tutor assumes they know which formats of instructional materials students prefer to access. The tutor concluded that it may have been useful to introduce the blog to students more formally, meaning during a class session, to familiarise them with the technology and expectations. They acknowledged that several issues arose during the module, which were not apparent at the beginning, and therefore could only be addressed when they occurred.

Conclusion and recommendations

The research conducted for this study appears to show that the use of a blog had a positive effect on students and tutor, as well as my own skills, attitudes, perceptions and behaviour. It has been found that all participants felt that they had developed additional skills and slightly increased their confidence in either using digital tools or language. The research reflects the findings from previous studies, especially in relation to students, adding another case study to the existing literature. It can be established that the initial research questions have not been answered in a way that allows generalisation. This is to say that while the results show that an impact on skills development and motivation has been made, there is scope for additional research into the impact and effects that the introduction of technology may have on students, as well as tutors and others who support the introduction of educational technology. However, sufficient data was collected to recommend practical developments, especially in the immediate context of the study.

Recommendations for practice

It has been established that a lack of knowledge and confidence about the opportunities that technology and e-learning may add can hinder their successful integration into teaching. In this study's context, it appears that technology was successfully integrated into teaching because of the support that was available to the tutor and students throughout the module. It is suggested that the module should be repeated in a similar form in the next academic year, with slight amendments to the technology that is used, as well as the roles of the team involved to guarantee sustainability. It appears that some issues, such as the ability to provide adequate scaffolding for the development of digital skills, may be alleviated by ensuring that the tutor is confident in their skills relating to the technology tools that are used. This necessary confidence may be increased by providing suitable training and institutional support (King and Boyatt, 2014; Stanley, 2013; Birch and Burnett, 2009), especially as necessary institutional strategies are in place already (University of Leeds, no date; 2013), and access to appropriate technology is guaranteed. These ensure that the tutor can access any necessary training as part of professional development initiatives, while providing a basis for cultural change (Tyler, 2007).

In order to facilitate the development of digital practices and skills in tutors and students, colleagues supporting this or any similar future projects need to:

- be aware of student need, resource and assessment design to be able to advise on appropriate technologies, including opportunities and potential issues
- be able to tailor training to tutors' and students' perceived and actual needs
- be able to clearly define roles and responsibilities, so that informed decisions about levels of support can be made, including need for sustainability

Overall, it can be established that no major changes are necessary, but that slight changes will benefit both the tutor and students of this particular module.

The full study, including references, can be accessed at the link below (4 November 2016):

https://bumsonseats.files.wordpress.com/2016/10/schneider_criticalstudy.pdf