



# The Blog in the French Class: Higher Motivation and Improved Competences

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## Abstract

*Nowadays communication has become more and more familiar in the virtual space. Students frequently use technology in order to communicate with friends and they also have a lot of fun with it. Faster and better communication as well as fun and motivation are in high need in many language classes. In this perspective I have tried to find out if the use of ICT, more precisely a blog, can improve communication and motivation in an 8<sup>th</sup> grade French class with quite poor results from a small town in Romania.*

*I applied tests, observation grids, interviews and a questionnaire between September 2013 and May 2014. The blog of our class started at the beginning of the school year with written assignments. At that time nobody in the class was interested in studying French and the initial A1 level test showed very low results. Nevertheless interest in the class started to build up with the blog and after three months a questionnaire showed a remarkable progress in the students' participation. The test as well as the observation grids marked an improvement in writing. At the end of the school year the results were positive with 18 students out of 24 who significantly improved both their oral and written competences. There is also the case of a student at risk who constantly comes to the French class yet frequently skips most of the other classes. High performance is also possible since 4 out of the 24 students in the class decided to choose a French intensive class for next year in high school. In the interview they explained they love French and believe they can study it at a faster pace.*

*My conclusion is that the blog first determined a change in my students' attitude towards the French class, next it helped them to be more confident in their writing and later in their oral skills as well. The blog has brought about clear improvement in a low attainment class.*

## 1. Introduction

"French is dull". This has been my first challenge as a young teacher of French when stepping into the class. Could I change that?

Romania is a country that traditionally was oriented towards France. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, most of the elite would study in France and bring back ideas, culture as well as the "taste" of the language. Officially Romania is still considered a "pays francophone", at least by the French speaking international association. But in actual terms, at least as far as the youth is concerned, the above-mentioned language level is not for real. Young people embrace English even though their mother tongue has similar structures to the ones in French. English is nevertheless easier in their view. Firstly, because it is fashionable: computer "stuff", music, films, games are mostly in English. So there is more motivation for learning the language and at the same time more opportunities to practice it. Secondly, English teachers and English-language methodology are more student-oriented whereas their French counter parts still value primarily "le discours magistral", including a book-centered approach in the class.

Recent studies have showed both the extent and the depth of the new media in the teens' lives [2]. They are totally immersed in the new technology and their cognitive patterns as well as their aspirations evolve around ICT tools and their amazing potential [7]. In Romania, teachers, even if they use the media themselves for communication, entertainment and - increasingly - for further education, they are quite reluctant to use them in the class [5]. Nevertheless, when educators give it a try the results are positive. Very recent small experiments into the use of Facebook [1] and blogs [3] in our University highlight that students regain enthusiasm for the particular language class if ICT tools are used to mediate communication and the teaching – learning of communication. In fact it is a pity to disregard the impact of social media for communication mainly in the teaching of the school subjects the aim of which is communication [6]. The students are the first ones to have this intuition: School is boring, media are cool. As simple and simplistic it might seem, the new media, if brought to school, can change it from boring to cool.



## 2. General data about the research

During my first year as a teacher I also got enrolled in a graduate program focused on intercultural communication. During the program we were challenged with a variety of intercultural projects. One of these consisted in identifying an intercultural communication problem and in developing a project in order to test solutions. I was part of a group of four who chose to look into the lack of communication between students and teachers from two rural schools where we taught. We tried to improve relationships and communication by making Facebook our medium for home assignments [1]. The project was successful and it motivated me for a follow up.

Motivation is a huge issue in Romanian schools and when it comes to languages we face the extra problem of a cultural stereotype among youngsters and the languages they have in school. As stated before, French is dull. Because it is dull it is also difficult. Results are not good so students become more and more unmotivated. It is one of the typical situations where the downwards spiral makes the case simply worse. The aim of my research was to try and reverse this scenario and support my students to try for better results.

I have tried to find out if the use of a blog, can improve communication and motivation in an 8<sup>th</sup> grade French class from a small town in Romania. The decision about the blog came from the clear advantage of the group of students' interest in technology. My expectation was that curiosity could arise as well as the opportunity to learn from one another since everybody had access to all the other written results.

The target group consisted of 24 students (12 boys and 12 girls), from the Secondary School No. 4 in Moreni, Romania. If the expected level for the end of grade 8 is A2 (according to the official curriculum), most of the students in the class had not been able to reach A1 in French. This was their level when we first met in September 2013 (beginning of their 8<sup>th</sup> grade). Moreover, they showed no interest in learning French, since "it is no worth" and it is also "very conventional" and "uninteresting". That was said in plain honesty during a group interview I organized during the first class.

In terms of methodology, between September 2013 and May 2014, I used: two group interviews (to see the students' opinions about the French class at the beginning of the school year and towards its end), a short questionnaire at the end of the first term (to investigate what the students perceptions about the project are), monthly language progress tests (to see if their communication competences improve), observation grids (to explore their involvement in the class, as well as their oral competences).

The project phases included:

- The design and creation of a blog dedicated to the 8 graders' French written assignments;
- The posting and the evaluation of the assignments (which took place from November 2013 to May 2014);
- The final evaluation of the project took place at the end of May.

The posted assignments were related to events from the students' daily life. The assignments were posted weekly, and the students were supposed to do it until the next week, excepting for the holidays, when there was no homework! Nevertheless several messages were posted during the holidays. For instance there was a seasons' greetings message and card for Christmas so that students could remain with each even if they do not interact for school matters. The aim was to maximize the popularity of the digital medium in the context of French study.

The level of difficulty of the assignments varied from A1 to A2 so that they could be accessible to all the students in the group and, at the same time, challenge their proximal development.

### 2.1 Example of posted home assignment:

- Describe a day from your life. What are you doing in the morning, in the afternoon, in the evening?

The aim of this assignment was to think about daily activities and writing about them. The request was accompanied by a set of funny drawings that operated like prompts for the production of the short description.

Figure 1 shows the assignment while Figure 2 highlights some replies.

Décrivez une journée habituelle pour vous. Qu'est-ce que vous faites le matin, à midi, l'après-midi et le soir ? **Attention ! Vous devez utiliser le présent !**



Figure No. 1 – Example of homework



**Huzui Mihaela** 27 februarie 2014, 10:23

Je me réveille le matin et me brosse les dents. Je vais à l'école et commencer les cours. Après je sors de l'école et revenir à la maison faire mes devoirs. et puis regarder la télévision et surfer sur le web. puis prendre une douche. Ma journée se termine à 22:30 ou plus tard

Răspundeți



**Manu Corozel** 27 februarie 2014, 11:37

Chaque matin, je me réveille à 7h 45. Je fais le lit et puis je vais à la salle de bain et je me lave sur le visage et je me brosse les dents. Je m'habille et je vais à l'école. Après l'école, je rentre chez moi. je prend le déjeuner et je me repose un peu. Ensuite, je fais mes devoirs et je l'étudie. soirée surfer sur le web. Ma journée se termine à 23:00 PM.

Răspundeți

Figure 2 Response to posted homework

### 3. Results

The main aim of the research was to support the students to get better results. In this respect I tried to see if the use of a blog for various assignments could raise the students' motivation for learning and, from there, improve their communication competences in French.

The progress was slow in the beginning, but after several weeks motivation increased and after three months, 18 out of the 24 students in the group significantly improved their oral and written competences.

I shall present below some highlights from the analysis of the results:

**Involvement.** When the blog project was announced, the students were very excited. The excitement remained constant for 3 months, but after the winter holidays it decreased. The solution I found was to stop posting assignments on the blog. In two weeks' time, the students began to miss their online homework, so they began to ask whether they would be having any more work on our blog.

**Attendance.** The improvement of the attendance was obvious in the case of one student at risk. While implementing the blog project, this student stopped skipping the French class, even if he continued to do so for other classes.

**Language performance.** The initial tests marked very low performance with more than half of the students unable to solve A1 level items they failed in the following: understanding the topic of a text, identifying information from ads and writing simple functional texts. As seen in the posts above (about



half time through the project), students make mistakes but communication is possible. Towards the end of the school year 4 out of the 24 students in the class decided to choose a French intensive class for their next year in high school. In the interview they explained they love French and believe they can study it at a faster pace.

The most interesting aspect about language performance is that at first the blog made the students do their homework. Then they slowly but steadily improved their reading and writing. With the time being the students started to be better in oral communication during the f2f classes. This happened mainly because they were more courageous in speaking. At the beginning of our blog project most of the students were quite shy during the class and explained they were “fearful” or “shameful” about making mistakes.

Attitude towards school. The students’ attitude towards school, in general, and towards the French class in particular, changed. They have seen that school can be fun, and they began to ask during the second group interview: “Why can’t we also do this activity in other classes, with other teachers?”. One of the girls also mentioned that she loves the French class blog since she can do her homework on the I-phone and it can be done no matter when and no matter where. The idea of being “mobile” with the homework is a great thing and consequently school becomes “cool”.

Moreover, the teacher is no longer the only source of information they have. They can easily read their classmates homework and use it as an example, learning from each other.

## 4. Conclusions

The blog project has increased the students’ motivation for learning and improved their competences. There is also a bonus since nowadays they perceive school differently. If at the beginning of the last school year I found a group of students uninterested in school and totally unmotivated to study French, now things have changed. They are more involved, they are more confident, they have a positive attitude towards French.

The blog proved to be a catalyser for this change. Even if there was no time for an extended research with the 8 graders, since in June 2014 they left our school to start their high school, their learning experience was memorable and profitable – both in their opinions and in the results of the tests.

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