

Raising learner motivation through a cultural pen-pal scheme: a collaborative study

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ABSTRACT

Collaboration amongst colleagues at partnering schools was established in order to decide a shared goal and implement culture into lessons across schools. The aim of this study is to raise motivation for language learning by providing KS4 students the opportunity to interact with the second language community through a pen-pal scheme. Dornyei's language-related integrative values were applied to develop activities that can raise cross-cultural awareness. Byram's *savoirs* informed the assessing of cultural understanding, reflecting on one's own culture, analysing cultural phenomena and carrying out comparisons. Evidence of these criteria were identified in two sets of email exchanges that KS4 students sent to their pen-pal. To measure the impact of the intervention, pupil work was compared from the first and second email exchange to detect development in cultural understanding. Pre and post intervention questionnaires were employed before and after the two email exchanges, to gauge levels of motivation at School A, surrounding students' interest to learn about foreign cultures and their attitudes towards direct contact with the target language community. The study found that the initial idea of the pen-pal sparked students' motivation however, further email exchanges were needed for impact to be made. The study also confirmed that culture and language are inter-related.

Keywords: Collaboration, learner motivation, culture, KS4 Spanish, pen-pals

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INTRODUCTION

Vangrieken et al describes collaboration within schools on a continuum between cooperation and collaboration (2015: 17). Reflecting upon opportunities for collaboration, shared lesson planning within the department is more ‘cooperation’ than collaboration as this is completed individually, despite the department having a uniform structure for all Modern Foreign Language (MFL) lessons. Vangrieken et al’s observations influenced the collaboration sessions with colleagues to help integrate cultural opportunities into lessons. This involved the motivation to collaborate, efficiency and impact, for example, on workload.

Before the first collaborative call, 100% of colleagues were positive about the prospect of collaborating. Overall, whilst there was a positive attitude to collaboration, colleagues commented on time restraints and a lack of focus being the main barriers to collaboration. One colleague noted: ‘I have been doing less collaboration than I thought, and instead been fulfilling roles that have been divided up in a team. Thus, collaboration in theory is efficient for best practice but needs to be done properly’. Overall, colleagues observed that having clear aims, a common goal and being organised could lighten workload and be efficient. This aligns with Vangrieken et al’s claim that teacher collaboration can positively impact workload and teacher morale (2015: 27). In the light of this, Cat Scutt, Director of Education comments upon the importance evidence-informed teaching, where, ‘by drawing on evidence, teacher’s practice, and in turn, students’ outcomes, can be improved’. (Scutt, 2020). This was used to integrate cultural work and thereby increase student motivation.

Hennebry notes that teaching culture in the UK curriculum is framed as optional, whereby ‘developing an appreciation of the richness and diversity of other cultures *could* include different aspects of other cultures and [enable] students to recognise that there are different ways of seeing the world’ (2013: 141). Hennebry goes on to state that UK teachers reported that the UK curriculum was too ‘prescriptive’ and mention that there are too many ‘obstacles’ to teaching culture such as the lack of time and too much emphasis on ‘linguistic proficiency’, where MFL teachers felt ‘ill-equipped’ with strategies for teaching culture (2013: 148). Learning to appreciate culture is not as difficult as learning the target language and the premise that underpinned this intervention was inclusivity. The purpose of an MFL education, as outlined in the MFL GCSE guidance is to develop awareness and understanding of the culture and identity of the countries and communities where the language is spoken (2015: 3). Given that the KS4 curriculum does not include sufficient opportunities for direct contact with the target language culture, the aim of this study was to provide students with the opportunity to engage with the target language culture. Collaborating with colleagues at partnering schools, it was decided that learning must be fun and dynamic. A pen-pal scheme was introduced for Year 11 Spanish students at School A in London, United Kingdom with students at School X in Argentina.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research in this field is very much focused around the use of cultural resources, such as ‘objects’, ‘magazine articles’, or ‘visual and audio material’ in the classroom (Jones, 1995: 2). Jones defines cultural awareness as ‘knowledge about’ as well as ‘thinking about’ and ‘talking about’ culture (1995: 1), how pupils can gain cultural awareness without leaving the country, and talks about starting points whereby students can acquire an understanding of foreign conventions, attitudes and values (1995: 2). Jones’ study mentions a cultural awareness project between students in Ankara (Turkey) and Getafe (Spain), whereby students exchanged objects that reflected their culture and sent them in shoeboxes abroad (1995:25). Such findings were useful for my practice and influenced by intervention design, involving a pen-pal scheme between students at School A and students at School X in Argentina. Although a reliable source and case study, the report did not justify the incorporation of cultural elements in lessons. Incorporating culture was more than simply ‘knowledge about’ or ‘awareness of’ foreign cultures and practices, as Jones states. Whilst ‘use of realia and photographs, can provide a personal context for the presentation of target culture(s)’ (Brown, 1986:185), I was keen to harness curiosity about the foreign culture through the target language.

Other existing research papers developed Brown’s views further, and explored the importance of galvanising *curiosity* towards the target language culture. Coleman et al deduces that if students have a personal connection with the target language culture, they are then motivated to learn the target language (2007:247). Similarly, the Evans and Fisher report stated that motivation for learning another language stemmed from learning about other cultures, and that the two are not mutually exclusive (2010: 490). As it stands, ‘integrative motivation’ is low in the UK, namely, the motivation to learn a language in order to communicate with and feel a personal connection to the target language community (1985:54). Thus, whilst there is an innate curiosity to learn about other cultures, it is not addressed enough in the KS4 curriculum, and students are not given enough opportunities to interact with the target language culture. The Evans and Fisher report highlights the importance of learning the target language via ‘real communication’, whereby ‘effective and enjoyable language learning is by-product of meaningful interaction rather than an explicit object of study’ (2010:490). Students can therefore communicate for real purposes, and express their own views in the target language. Pachler comments on ‘context embeddedness’ (2014:245) and the importance of students engaging with *relevant* material which is necessary for raising motivation.

Consequently, I decided to focus on a strand of the Evans and Fisher report based on *communicating for real purposes* with the target language culture, in order to raise motivation for pupils. This underpinned the premise of establishing a pen-pal scheme with School X in Argentina. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the MFL department at School A has not been able to provide opportunities to visit the target language country. Brown states that contact with a target language country leads to ‘finding out more about the respective countries and cultures’ and ‘can lead to acculturation later in life’ (186: 195).

I looked for subject-specific strategies to establish communication for real purposes within the language classroom. Brown states that the teacher plays an important part in ‘facilitating the development of cultural awareness’ through choosing relevant activities that will require ‘careful planning and structuring’ (1986: 201). Dornyei and Byram provide integrative cultural opportunities to raise motivation. Zoltán Dornyei observes the relationship between cultural awareness and L2 language-learning. He notes that enhancing a learner’s language-related values can help to build motivation (2001: 51). I therefore adopted the following four strategies outlined by Dornyei to help build the ‘integrative values’ and to raise cross-cultural awareness which constituted as my group’s shared aim:

1. Enhancing the learners' language-related values and attitudes – Contact with L2 speakers would develop learners’ cross-cultural awareness. By writing to pen-pals, students would focus on cross-cultural similarities (as well as differences) in their ‘real communication’. Dornyei discusses ‘making the strange familiar’, and suggests that L2 speaking pen-friends or ‘keyboard friends’ are a good strategy for generating initial motivation.
2. Making learning stimulating and enjoyable – Contact with the target language culture with the pen-pal scheme was how I intended to raise engagement and motivation; incorporating culture to raise engagement was also my colleagues’ shared aim. Lessons would ensure material was relevant for learners. The content of the letters written to the pen-pal in Argentina would focus on the issues that affected year 11 students.
3. Creating learner autonomy – my aim was for students to feel increased ownership over the task by virtue of sending an email to their pen-pal. They would send the email for homework, which was a creative independent task.
4. Making success criteria as clear as possible – use of sentence starters and writing frames would help students to understand ‘which elements of their performance and production, are essential’, which would enable students to successfully write a letter to their pen-pal.

Bruner’s concept of spiralling (1960), informed my planning for the final two lessons, having reviewed the response from the Argentine students. Year 11 returned to previous learning to revise understanding and concepts by revisiting them (Moore, 2012: 22). Bruner writes that ‘acquired knowledge is most useful to the learner when it is related to and used in reference to what one has known before’ (1996: xii).

Michael Byram proposes a model of intercultural communicative competence, known as the five *savoirs*. Byram’s model involves *knowledge (savoirs)*, *attitudes (savoir être)*, *skills (savoir comprendre)*, critical cultural awareness (*savoir s’engager*) and finally, the skills of discovery and interaction (*savoir apprendre*) (1997: 35). Whilst all *savoirs* are relevant to the intervention design, *savoir apprendre* and *savoir être* are of paramount importance, and also related to my colleagues’ shared aim. *Savoir être* refers to interest in discovering other cultures and the willingness to question values in one’s own culture (1997: 34). This project’s aim was to raise motivation to learn the target language and give students the opportunity to connect with the second language community and build bridges between their cultures. *Savoir apprendre*

enables students to acquire new knowledge of a culture and they would operate this knowledge in *real communication and interaction*.

Andrea Dlasca proposes a counter-argument stating that cultural learning could put learners' linguistic progress at risk, since linguistic progress may be 'compromised by combining language study with such weighty and unwieldy subject matter' (2000: 250). Despite this, it is arguable that both language and culture are inextricably linked. Learning the target language and real communication links the speakers to a community. Hennebry notes how language is 'instrumental in the socialising process' enabling students to express their emotions and thoughts (2013: 136). He goes on to state that language is the main tool for 'transmitting culture', 'linking individuals into communities of shared identity' (2013: 136). Language and culture have a symbiotic relationship and language is key to discovering this new culture. These views influenced the intervention design.

METHODOLOGY

Collaboration between colleagues at partnering schools was used to formulate the research question: how can we incorporate cultural elements into lessons in order to increase learner motivation in MFL? Thus, the shared group aim between colleagues sought to incorporate culture as a 'fifth skill' into schemes of work and lessons, making language learning more 'real' and engaging for students. This informed the pen-pal intervention of this study.

Participants

Participants involved Year 11 students at School A (age range 15-16), in their second year of the AQA GCSE course. Students from School X in Argentina also participated in the email exchange. Year 11's data was analysed.

Structure of collaboration

Once the shared aim was decided, collaboration was set up according to the following three facets: administrative, professional and psychological (Teach First, 2021: 3). Considering the administrative aspect, there were five calls and the method of communication was a shared google document for documenting best-practice and steps for collaboration. Considering the professional aspect, WhatsApp was used to liaise with each other between calls and set the agenda on the shared google document. There would also be action points following each call, for example, pedagogical readings were divided between to the group to discuss following the first call. Meetings were efficient and each person would contribute in turn. Contributions in the third call involved presenting research and opinions on theoretical reading to the rest of the group. Thus, contributions from others would allow each teacher to inform their intervention and adapt teaching practice. In the fourth call, colleagues' interventions plans were discussed.

Intervention Design

Following collaborative discussions with colleagues, it was decided that the intervention would take place during homework at School A. Brown observes that it is important to ensure that projects that involve 'use of email or the internet in MFL teaching' or a form of exchange with

a partner school, must be ‘properly embedded in the scheme of work’, with clear aims and objectives (1986: 192). In the light of this, students carried out two email exchanges with their pen-pal over a series of five lessons.

The first lesson taught Year 11s how to talk about the environment using the verb ‘deber’, and enabled me to make the lesson content relevant to students as Dornyei mentions. Students were able to talk about what they ought to do to protect the environment, and what they already do at home. The first lesson instigated Dornyei’s (2001: 51) ‘learner autonomy’ as students completed a writing task that mentioned the steps they took to protect the environment.

In order to make content *relevant* and engaging for learners which was the collaborative aim (Dornyei, 2001: 55) lesson 2 developed lesson 1, encouraging students to think about actions taken at a *local* level to protect their environment. The present subjunctive was taught in the context of students discussing strategies to tackle local issues. Again, learner autonomy was embedded through the first email exchange for homework, where students wrote an email stating what they do at home to help the environment, what they would like to do with their family, and what is currently done in the town that they live in. In this way, Bruner’s spiralling technique was used, whereby information provided to students which had been scaffolded in lessons 1 and 2 formed the structure for the email. The success criteria were made clear and students were given a writing frame to complete the task (1996: xii). The email task enabled me to enhance students’ *savoir être*, and encourage students to reflect on their own culture, thereby enhancing their cultural knowledge.

Lessons 3-5 built on the use of the present subjunctive and introduced impersonal verbs, to talk about possible solutions for tackling global issues that were mentioned by the Argentinians. Lessons 4 and 5, ‘piensa globalmente’, from the AQA course, enabled me to enhance my students’ critical cultural awareness as they considered global solutions, as outlined by Byram (1997: 37). Year 11s then completed their second email, addressing the themes from their pen-pal, and writing about what concerned them most in the world and what they would do to improve it. Based on responses to email task 1, it was possible to provide students with relevant sentence starters in order to complete their second email exchange successfully.

Data Collection Tools

Students at School A, London, were set pre and post intervention questionnaires before and after the two email exchanges with students in School X, Argentina, asking questions on students’ interest to learn about foreign cultures and their attitudes towards direct contact with the target language community. The questionnaires made use of open and closed questions in order to identify changes before and after the intervention. Further proxies were included to determine Year 11’s attitudes to both language and culture (informed by Hennebry). 3-5 different options were included, using Likert scale to avoid a positive response bias with respondents simply answering ‘yes’ to questions on enjoyment. This allowed me to gain a more nuanced understanding. Survey questions were informed by Byram’s *savoirs*, focusing around attitudes towards and knowledge of the L2 culture. In this way, the students’ perspective coupled with colleagues’ collaborative input, underpinned with pedagogical literature would

avoid a deficit mindset: the focus would be on improving future teaching practice and avoiding inaccurate conclusions.

Sampled work

Work was sampled from 3 students which reflect a range of abilities across Year 11s. However, it is possible that cognitive bias may have influenced selection of students' work for analysis. Although all students were given the same criteria and time-frames to complete the activities, some may have spent longer completing the homework task compared to others.

Data Analysis

Byram identifies possible areas of assessment of cultural understanding such as asking appropriate questions, reflecting on one's own culture, analysing cultural phenomena and carrying out comparisons (1991: 389). Thus, evidence of these criteria would be identified in the two emails that Year 11 sent to their pen-pal. To measure the impact of the intervention, I will also compare pupil work from the first and second email exchange to see if there is a development in cultural understanding.

Brookfield's reflective model of experiential learning (2017) was used in order to evaluate the intervention and assess the impact. With my mentor, I discussed my lesson plans prior to the two email exchange interventions. Given the collaborative nature of this paper, I will include my mentor and Teach First colleagues' perspectives in my evaluation of the intervention, which forms part of Brookfield's lens. Brookfield's model involves inclusion of the student perspective. It was important for me to understand Year 11's perspectives in order to evaluate the impact of the intervention in order to see if there had been a change in attitude. Interpretative analysis was then conducted using Byram's *savoirs* as the theoretical framework.

Ethics

Ethical approval was granted by University College London. Participants at School A, London and School X, Argentina signed a consent form for participation and use of their data before the project took place. Students were given a briefing on the aims, methodology and recruitment for the study. All student names and data were anonymised.

RESULTS

First, I will begin with comparing student responses from the two exchanges with school X in Argentina.

Student 1, has made good use of the sentence starters and examples provided in lessons 1 and 2 to construct their email. There is evidence of the student 'analysing cultural phenomena' as Byram suggests, with the description of practices 'en mi región', (in my area) and of their own practices. In the first and second email, Student 1 does not ask questions about the target language culture in response to their pen-pal's email or carry out comparisons, responding to specific details in their pen-pal's response, which does not demonstrate Byram's *savoir apprendre*.

Student 2, has provided a full account of global issues ranging from gender inequality, racial discrimination and unemployment. Student 2 demonstrates that they have been able to draw links between their own culture and that of the target language community, demonstrating Byram’s *savoir être*. Student 2 asked pertinent questions about the L2 community in class, and gave positive contributions about what common practices were shared between Argentine culture and their own culture during class discussion. Student 2 later mentioned that exploring such commonalities made them feel more connected to the target language culture.

Student 3’s first email reads well, and the student has been able to provide more information when reflecting on practices in their local culture. Dornyei’s strategies of ‘making success criteria as clear as possible’ were drawn upon, by providing live feedback during the independent practice phases of lessons 1-2, and by *demonstrating* success. Student 3 therefore shows evidence of benefiting from this and making progress with successful use of the subjunctive phrases taught in the lesson. By asking leading questions in their second response, student 3 demonstrates curiosity in the target language community, by adding personalising touches to their email.

Pre and post intervention questionnaire analysis

Considering the students’ perspectives (Brookfield’s lens), in the pre-survey, 67% of students said they would like to learn more about different cultures in lessons and 100% of students selecting neutral-strongly agree options for wanting to have direct contact with foreign cultures (figure 1).

1. I would like to learn more about different cultures in Spanish lessons

[More Details](#)

● Strongly agree	4
● Agree	6
● Neutral	5
● Disagree	0
● Strongly disagree	0



5. I would like to have more direct contact with foreign cultures

[More Details](#)

● Strongly agree	5
● Agree	5
● Neutral	5
● Disagree	0
● Strongly disagree	0



Conversely, in the post-survey 45% of students responded with ‘neutral’ to feeling ‘more in touch’ with the foreign culture with direct contact through the pen-pal scheme, with 3 students

disagreeing to this statement (originally, in the pre-survey, none of the students had disagreed to any of the statements regarding motivation for contact with the target language community).

Figure 1: Students' pre-intervention questionnaire

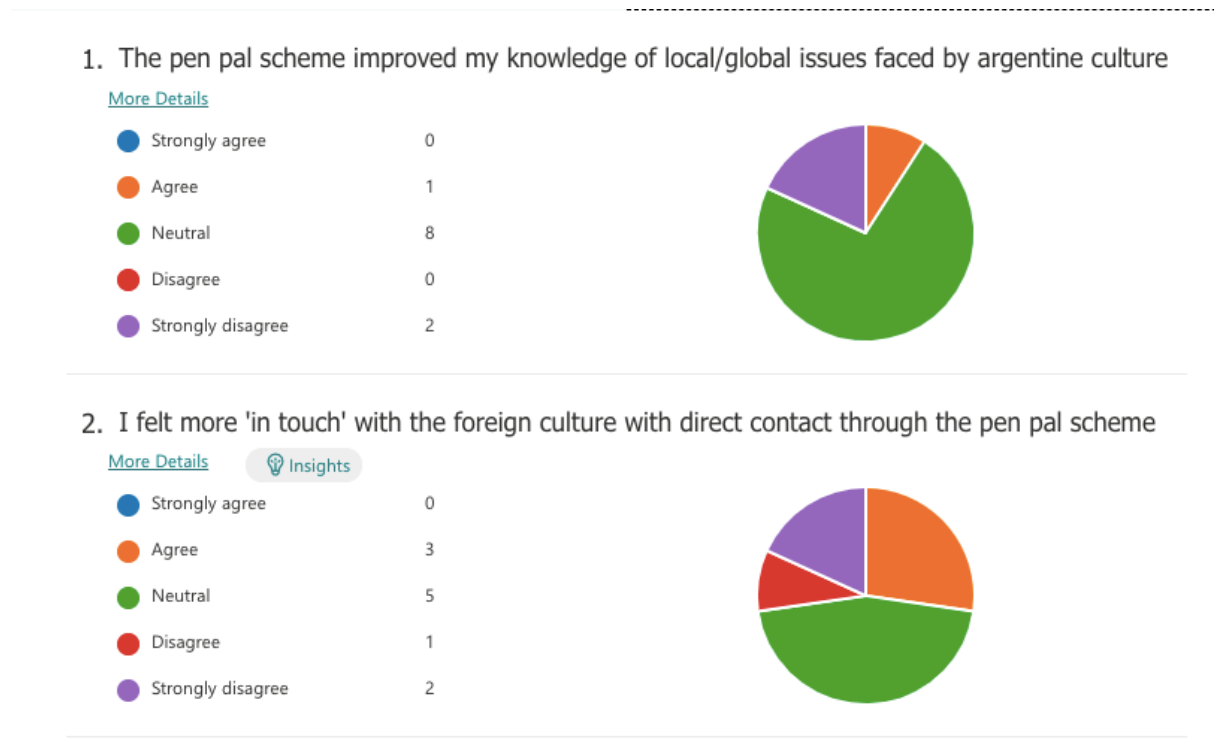


Figure 2: Students' post- intervention questionnaire

One must note that 73% of students responded with neutral to the scheme having an impact on their knowledge of local and global issues. Considering the data provided by the post-survey, one can infer that students would have benefitted from further exchanges on alternative topics (figure 2).

Analysis of teacher-collaboration model used and limitations to model:

The post-collaboration survey demonstrates that collaboration was useful for reducing workload. Taking the pedagogical strand of Brookfield's lens, pedagogical literature was used to inform evaluations. During the first three collaboration calls, there was an element of anchoring bias, where colleagues were focusing mainly on using cultural content in lessons as a means of improving engagement, without giving much importance to language. Having explored this idea further through theoretical reading, it is evident that culture and language were very much inter-dependent (also informed by my experiences of teaching culture), in unison with Hennebry's proposal. A colleague mentioned 'students can share their ideas in English and there are no right or wrong answers so long as they are engaging with the content. Thus, all students will come out having learnt something if not linguistic skills – they will still have a deeper understanding of the culture and knowledge of how to relate and respect each other'. Nonetheless, it was predominantly through real, *direct*, communication, that Year 11 students would potentially feel more engaged, and had the ability to relate to and be open up to the target language community.

There may have also been an element of confirmation bias with those colleagues who included 'cultural realia' or cultural stereotypes in lessons as that has been known to raise engagement in the past through colleagues' experiences of bringing cultural objects into the classroom as a 'show and tell' technique. Thus, there was also an element of French's 'expert power' occurring within the collaboration group, whereby colleagues who had explored culture in the past through previous research may have dominated discussions during our intervention planning phase (1959: 155). Bovbjerg notes that collaborative groups may result in more 'closed social systems', forming 'exclusive groups in the organisational structure of the school' (2006: 244). However, this was not a problem as the collaboration occurred amongst teachers across Teach First London schools, and so change to our practice occurred on an individual-basis across MFL lessons at respective schools. Nonetheless, one participant in the post-survey notes how it is important to make collaboration more focused around common agendas. Considering Vangrieken's spectrum, it is arguable that there were still elements of cooperation. Conducting individual research on different interventions may not have been the most effective way to practise collaboration.

Certain shortcomings that were present during collaboration include being driven by self-interest (to advocate ideas related to culture, and ignore language) but also agreeing to ideas, constituting 'contrived collegiality' (Vangrieken et al, 2015: 29). There was often little communication between calls, which often meant questions went unanswered. Dividing the workload and sharing readings was a positive aspect of collaboration and something the group would like to maintain. Having conducted further research, Thomson and Holloway's paper on staff development procedures at a primary school suggests that as long as teachers have a commitment to improvement, and there are provisions to support collaborative initiatives in school, it is beneficial to staff development (2015: 324). Thus, sharing best practice with colleagues in a 'Teaching and Learning' clinic, this will make collaboration less contrived. To develop this further, monitoring collaboration and encouraging feedback would avoid Vangrieken's 'contrived collegiality' that was experienced during my collaboration with colleagues, but rather, encourage a more critical-

reflective attitude. Given the restrictiveness of the schemes of work or what schools permit, it is also important to establish collaboration amongst colleagues within the same school.

Limitations

Considering my colleague's perspective, students 'would have benefited from a third exchange' for sustained impact to be made on pupil learning and progress. My colleague also commented on the importance of making the lesson content as engaging as possible to sustain learner motivation. The module will later cover sporting events, and there is scope for students to write to each other about national sport, which is likely to highly engage the L2 Argentine community as well as the Year 11s.

CONCLUSIONS

To conclude, whilst the initial idea of the pen-pal sparked motivation amongst Year 11 students and allowed for skills of discovery and interaction (*savoir apprendre*) and fostered cultural outlooks and attitudes (*savoir être*), further email exchanges were needed for impact to be made. Considering Dornyei's four strategies for generating motivation that informed my intervention, students were given clear success criteria. Nonetheless, students would have benefitted from formative feedback on their emails which would have prepared them well for future exchanges. Learner autonomy was generated during the homework phase, however, as sentence starters were provided, there was arguably a lack of individuality and authenticity to year 11's emails. Students' language-related values could have been developed further through choice of topic. Commentary and reflections on the local environment may not have made learning 'stimulating and engaging' and one can speculate that it may not have allowed for the cross-cultural awareness that is discussed by both Dornyei and Byram. Byram's theory also focuses on the spontaneity of interpreting foreign documents (1997: 37). As suggested by Byram, in the future Year 11 students and students from the target language community could work together to identify commonalities in their local issues and to design solutions together, over a zoom interaction. If Argentine students initiate the first email, it would also encourage my students to interpret foreign documents 'spontaneously', triggering spontaneity, as suggested by Byram. This would also further generate Dornyei's learner autonomy, enabling students to feel more 'connected' to the L2 community in real-time communication rather than relying on writing frames and sentence starters to construct emails (which obliterated authenticity). Students will be given tools and vocabulary support, but should not feel wedded to use this. Thus, trialling another pen-pal exchange with a Year 7 Spanish class will be fruitful, where students can introduce themselves (name, age, introduce their family and talk about their hobbies) to their pen-pal, this would allow for Coleman's more 'personal connection' to the target language culture. Considering Dornyei's observations, such topics may be stimulating and more *relevant* to their lives, therefore having a positive impact on motivation.

Given that there is a large focus on the skill of writing during the pen-pal scheme, it begs the question whether culture can really be given the importance it deserves as a 'fifth' and separate

skill. The pen-pal scheme demonstrated that culture cannot be accessible without language and scaffolding, as outlined by Brown in his description of communicating for real purposes. This brings one back to my group's shared aim. There is scope for learner motivation to be enhanced by incorporation of culture, although my intervention does not necessarily demonstrate this. Whilst a colleague suggested that 'learning to appreciate culture is not as difficult as learning the target language, therefore all students will feel engaged', it ultimately becomes an *affirming the consequent* fallacy. Students can feel more connected to the target language culture when communicating for real purposes, yet in accordance to my own philosophy, both language and culture are inter-dependent, and are paramount for generating motivation.

Moreover, I hope to continue raising my students' motivation through innovative schemes such as foreign exchanges once exchange trips can run after Covid-19. I have been delegated the task to plan a trip for the next academic year, and thus I am keen to collaborate with a local school and run an exchange through this partnership. Enhancing learner's language-related values will generate motivation (Dornyei, 2001: 51) and obliterate insularity with cross-cultural contact, a notion discussed by Coleman. To fully achieve the group's common goal, I would now like to incorporate the use of TikTok videos as a means of implementing authentic cultural material in the classroom. This is an idea borrowed of two colleagues following collaboration to improve my future practice.

I am keen to use both language and culture together to continue raising motivation amongst my students, and I hope to collaborate with colleagues in other schools in order to achieve this.

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