

РАЗДЕЛ II. ТЕОРИЯ И МЕТОДИКА ОБУЧЕНИЯ И ВОСПИТАНИЯ

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ИСПОЛЬЗОВАНИЕ БЛОГОВ ПРИ ИЗУЧЕНИИ ИНОСТРАННОГО ЯЗЫКА В ВЫСШЕЙ ШКОЛЕ: ПРОБЛЕМЫ ОЦЕНКИ

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Аннотация

Цель. Блоговая деятельность обладает значительным потенциалом для развития коммуникативной компетенции у изучающих иностранный язык, однако этот вид деятельности слабо интегрируется в образовательный процесс в связи со сложностями его оценки в рамках балльно-рейтинговой системы, принятой в отечественных вузах. Данное исследование ставит своей целью изучение современных подходов к оцениванию в педагогической теории и практике преподавания иностранных языков, а также разработку схемы оценивания блоговой деятельности на иностранном языке в условиях вузовского образования.

Процедура и методы. В ходе исследования были использованы методы сравнительного анализа, анкетирования на основе компетентностного, личностно ориентированного и деятельностного подходов.

Результаты. В результате исследования была разработана схема оценки блоговой деятельности, сочетающая различные формы контроля и учитывающая существующие шкалы оценки учебной деятельности в рамках университетских программ обучения иностранному языку. Разработанная схема представляет собой цикл процедур оценивания, включающий качественную, количественную оценки, различные виды обратной связи и самооценку. Для облегчения внедрения данной системы оценивания в образовательный процесс были разработаны шкалы оценивания и разделы студенческого электронного портфолио.

Теоретическая и/или практическая значимость. Результаты данного исследования могут быть использованы преподавателями иностранного языка высших учебных заведений при формировании программ обучения иностранному языку и включении новых информационно-коммуникационных технологий в образовательный процесс.

Ключевые слова: блоговая деятельность, компетентностный подход, балльно-рейтинговая система, качественная и количественная оценка, обратная связь, схема оценки блоговой деятельности, электронное портфолио студента

USING BLOGS IN FL HIGHER EDUCATION: CHALLENGES OF ASSESSMENT

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Abstract

Aim. Blogging holds great potential for L2 learners' communicative competence development, but this type of activity remains poorly incorporated in formal education because of difficulties with its evaluation within the framework of the score-rating system of assessment adopted in Russian universities. This paper examines the issues of assessment in modern pedagogical theory and practice, particularly focusing on blog assessment, and proposes a blog assessment scheme for FL tertiary education.

Methodology and Approach. The methodology of research includes analytical and comparative methods as well as competence-based, learner-centered and action-oriented approaches.

Results. A blog assessment scheme was designed comprising different forms of control and scales for higher education programmes. The designed scheme presents a cycle of evaluation procedures incorporating formative, summative assessment, teacher and peer feedback, and self-assessment. For the introduction of the scheme into classroom practice, competence-based assessment scales with illustrative descriptors and sections of student e-portfolio (blog portfolio) were developed.

Theoretical and Practical Implications. The findings of the research can be used by lecturers of foreign languages in their designing educational programmes and integrating ICT in educational process.

Keywords: blogging, competence approach, score-rating system, formative and summative assessment, feedback, blog assessment scheme, student blog portfolio

Introduction

Blogs have become one of the most effective pedagogical tools for developing student writing skills in a foreign language. Like other ICTs blogs are widely used in modern teaching because they expand the classrooms being the forms of real-world activities. They raise learners' motivation, enhance their cognitive process and improve their communicative skills, on the one hand, but on the other hand – complicate assessment for educators. There is formidable research on blog didactic potential, but the problem of blogging assessment remains understudied, which probably leads to pessimistic claims of some scholars that 'blogs as a learning tool are most successful where they are used a flexible, voluntary and loosely prescribed tools' and that 'it is unlikely that blogs would be able to be an assessed element of education' [21, p. 97].

Meanwhile, for pedagogy this problem is of high importance as control in teaching

is a powerful means of stimulating students' further development. Some attempts have been made by Russian educationalists to solve this problem by designing taxonomies of communicative language skills developed via blogging in FL class [13], introducing different scales of grammatical accuracy for personal and class blogs [12], proposing peer-reviewing focused not only on the content, but lexico-grammatical correctness, stylistic features and even punctuation of student blog posts [14], or using e-portfolios as a means of control and assessment of the quality and progress of student autonomous work [5]. The latter suggestion looks most promising as the authors proposed multiple criteria for the assessment: quality of the blog (expertise, self-assessment and peer assessment); quality of self-presentation (adequacy of language means and coherence), quality of vocation-oriented tasks (translation, interpretation, data search and analysis).

In spite of these findings some problems still remain. Firstly, it is the problem of *the form of assessment*. As blogs are not traditional forms of teaching, their assessment cannot be traditional. Traditional assessment in higher education includes examination and written tests, which are considered more as a tool for exposing mistakes and providing background for teacher judgement on student performance than the means of improving the learning process. Students resist this type of assessment in blogging activity. And it can be understood. Blogs are important not only as means of producing content, but building social relations between students' peers and the teacher. Besides, blogs promote active learning, reflective thinking, and more flexibility in learning process because they are meant not for guided but autonomous work. Even responding to the task students consider blog writing as social media. Many of them become quite sincere and open-hearted and react painfully to any form of judgement. Thus, the teacher should be very careful in providing his/her comments on students' posts, leaving aside the marks. Secondly, it is the problem of *the object of assessment*. The core of blogging in FL education is writing, but it also involves interaction in the form of commenting, reading (on part of the peers) or even speaking and listening (in case of audio or video blogs). All these forms of activities may become the focus of teacher assessment. And within the framework of each particular activity the level of student achievement and performance (communicative competence) should be identified and measured. Besides, blog activity can testify to the development of other competences (e.g. cognitive, reflective, critical thinking ICT competence). Should the teacher take them into consideration or shift the focus of control to communicative competence only? Thirdly, it is the problem of *the status of assessment*, which consists in embedding blog assessment into the score-rating system of student overall performance evaluation adopted in Russian working programs for academic disciplines.

The present paper aims to find the solutions to the above stated problems and propose a model of blog assessment by reviewing pedagogical literature on assessment in FL education and language assessment experience of Russian and world educators, considering standard requirements for FL proficiency levels and analyzing the results of student survey on blogging.

Literature review

Assessment vs Feedback. The problem of assessment is one of the most acute in pedagogy. Psychologists and educationalists have been discussing it for decades, and yet there is a lack of commonality in views. The main tenet is contradiction between necessity to guide, monitor and evaluate the learning process and to mildly support and develop the personality of the learner stimulating the growth of the inner structures responsible for self-control. The views on the problem vary depending on methodical principles and pedagogical approaches. Thus, knowledge-centered approach adopts summative assessment (also called quantitative), which summarizes all the evidence of student's achievement up to a given point.

This form of assessment can have different functions: checking, evaluating, motivating, stimulating, instructional, correcting, diagnostic, etc. (the full lists of which can be observed in the works of such scholars as E. I. Perovsky, Yu. Babansky, V. M. Polonsky, V. A. Slastenin), but the identification of their multiplicity neither makes the form flexible, nor changes its nature, merely affecting the choice of assessment parameters. Summative assessment is focused on judgement revealing a gap between student knowledge and skills and the requirements of the standard. It is not concerned with learner's personal growth or achievement development. This negative feature of summative assessment led to reconsideration of its value for education and promoted further search for adequate evaluation.

In the late 1960s in English-speaking countries, a distinction was made between summative (quantitative) and formative

(qualitative) assessment. The latter comprises not only judgement, but also an indication of how student's work can be improved to meet the requirements. Formal assessment includes summative assessment, as clarifications and recommendations cannot be made without any judgement that precedes and stimulates them. Nevertheless, with the advance of learner-centered approach it was understood that assessment must not only be judgement on learner competence, but also feedback to guide learning.

An early reference to feedback as a mechanism of learning can be found in Wiener's treatment of cybernetics in his treatise on *The Human Use of Human Beings* (1950). Wiener's conception of feedback involves a dialogue between action and effect. The point is that feedback is not just information about performance but a process in which that information is somehow used to affect subsequent performance. But it was not until late 1980s when the central role of feedback was revealed in education. D. R. Sadler's famous definition says that information on student performance should be denoted feedback only if it is actually used to alter the gap between current performance and the performance aimed for [31]. Hence, feedback can produce any change in student learning if only students use it properly. Unfortunately, there is ample evidence that a number of students do not use the feedback they receive, and therefore do not realize the potential of feedback for learning.

During recent years, voluminous research has been made into the problem of productive use of feedback in higher education, and the main obstacles to the use of feedback by students have been identified. One of the major barriers is that students do not find the feedback useful, if the revision of assignments is not asked for; another problem is the lack of congruence between students' preferences for feedback and the kind of feedback that actually seem to aid them [26]. Researchers also mark that students may lack understanding of the academic terminology the instructors use, but what is

more important – they may lack strategies for productive use of feedback [20].

To cope with the situation educationalists began to search for the ways of improving the quality of feedback. Firstly, it concerned wording: feedback should be clear, not authoritative, motivating and explaining [34], less specific, but more personalized [26]. Another line of research stressed the importance of students' involvement in the assessment process and proposed peer-reviewing [16]. All these and other problems arose due to the change in the roles of educational agents and teacher-student relationships. With all controversy of opinions what was clearly understood was that feedback is not equal to either marking or comments, it is a dialogue between teacher and learners.

D. Nicol advocated a dialogical approach when designing feedback comments: 'While the quality of the comments is important, the quality of the students' interaction with those comments is equally, and perhaps more, important' [30, p. 503]. So, students should play an active role in constructing meaning from feedback information. According to the author, the dialogical nature of teacher written commentaries (their qualities of being adaptive, discursive, interactive and reflective) should be restored to make feedback effective. Moreover, the teachers should inquire on what aspects students would like to receive feedback. In this case needs analysis can be both ends rewarding: being aware of students' most urgent points, the teacher can better formulate his / her feedback, and in reflecting on their needs, students can prepare themselves for better understanding of teacher's comments. Another aspect that enhances the dialogical nature of feedback is student-student interaction (peer feedback). When students regularly give feedback on the works of peers, they improve their understanding of the quality work and different criteria to judge about it.

Similar idea was expressed by D. R. Sadler who highlighted three conditions for effective feedback: students' capacity to be able to monitor the quality of their work, ap-

preciation of what high quality work is and necessary evaluative and tactical skills to assess and modify their own work to perfection. The author argued that all this comes not through telling, but students' active interaction with feedback. To achieve this in students the teacher should not 'teach', but provide them with lots of examples of quality works and criteria for their assessment. 'The focus needs to shift away from the narrow issue how feedback can be improved and communicated, and towards the wider issue of how assessment (rather than feedback) can enhance student learning' [32, p. 56].

A multinational research *The Impact of Feedback in Higher Education: Improving Assessment Outcomes for Learners* (2019) suggested a new understanding of feedback in which the focus is shifted from the quality and timing of the comments teachers provide to how students become feedback aware. Feedback was defined as 'processes where the learner makes sense of performance-relevant information to promote their learning' [23, p. 13]. What differs this definition from the earlier ones is that feedback is understood as a process, in which learners are active participants, and it is largely a cognitive process (the learners should make sense of information). The book contains some valuable recommendations for practicing teachers how to increase the impact of feedback, namely through raising learner feedback literacy (Carless), embedding feedback into the socio-cultural context (Esterhazy), turning self-assessment into self-feedback (Padero et al.), raising visibility of feedback with digital technologies (Ryan et al.).

In spite of the comprehensive literature on feedback some questions still remain for a foreign language teacher due to the complexity of the discipline. The major of them are: 'Should feedback include or be opposed to error correction?', 'Does feedback improve student communicative skills and language accuracy in the long term?', 'What is the impact of peer-feedback on L2 learners?', 'Does the use of social media (blogs) in L2 context enhance the feedback process?'

Early L2 researchers argued that feedback on error was both discouraging and unhelpful [27; 33]. However, this opinion was not unanimous across different cultures: ESL students from cultures where teachers are highly directive, generally expect to be commented on their errors [25]. More recent research has largely confirmed the importance of written corrective feedback, and controlled studies show that feedback on specific linguistic features gives students an advantage over those receiving no feedback [17].

The results on peer feedback are mixed. Blog interfaces offer limited usefulness in highlighting mistakes when providing corrective feedback [18]. Nevertheless, as H. Huang remarks, blogs afford other types of feedback such as sharing ideas, answering questions and discussions [24, p. 44].

The ESL students greatly value teacher's feedback and rate it higher than peer-feedback [28]. As for peer-assessment, it is often resisted by students because they do not feel comfortable awarding grades to their friends and groupmates and are afraid of looking silly themselves. That is why peer feedback is usually more effective than peer assessment in a traditional class and especially in case of interactive e-learning: "Even when the ethos of the social software tools is to be collaborative, individual assessment may create competition among students and undermine the benefits of blogging" [29, p. 156]. Whereas other educators report that technology facilitated feedback enhances student performance as compared to conventional paper-based feedback [22].

Regarding the volume of works our review of literature on feedback and assessment is far from being exhaustive, but it gives general understanding of the situation in academia and classes worldwide. What can be surely concluded is that feedback processes are within assessment designs. Assessment is a broader phenomenon and all types of it (summative, formative and feedback) contribute to validity, reliability, and feasibility of student progress and outcomes evalua-

tion. The matter is in proportion among the types depending on the activity which is assessed and the goals of assessment. As educational process involves interactions among key elements: curriculum, assessment and instruction and between key agents: teachers and students, assessment cannot easily be abstracted and examined without the reference to these components and should be embedded into curriculum design, become part of pedagogy and teacher-learner relationships.

Competence-based approach vs score-rating system of assessment. Since the change of educational paradigm (from knowledge-centered to learner-centered) and transfer to competence-based approach, Russian pedagogy has been in search of adequate means of assessment. One such innovation in the national system of education was introduction of the 'score-rating system' of assessment which sporadically began in 1990s and became mandatory in 2003, when Russia joined the Bologna Process. The 'score-rating system' was summoned to substitute the traditional five-point scale scoring system of assessment that had functioned in Russian higher educational institutions since the 18th century and is still in use at primary and secondary schools. In fact, the 'score-rating system' has nothing to do with learner's position in class or group, but just another scoring system where the range of points is much wider than in the previous one (from 0 to 100) and the student has an opportunity to accumulate their points during the term. Though it brings some variety to the traditional forms of control (exams and tests) by introducing portfolios, projects, essays, case-studies and etc., it does not imply any new forms of assessment as the evaluation of the overall student performance is based on the same old-fashioned numerical basis.

Most of the authors of 2001–2010 years were quite enthusiastic about the 'score-rating system' considering it effective in measuring student performance objectively and monitoring their achievements during the study process (not only at the end of it!), implementing regular control over both

students and teachers, and as a result – raising the quality of education [11]. There was a mushrooming growth of 'technological maps' for controlling and assessing student performance in L2 learning [7].

The authors of the next decade were more specific in identifying the educational gaps that the score-rating system could bridge. Thus, it was observed that the new system conformed to the 'leading principles of monitoring, such as validity, reliability, consistency, regularity and transparency', and some educators reported 'effective application' of the score-rating system in their university, though without presenting either scales or forms of assessment, proclaiming only that 'the evaluation of vocabulary, grammar, reading, writing, listening, and speaking is systematic, timely and transparent' [8, p. 54]. Other authors did not only share their experience of introducing the score-rating system, but revealed the problems connected with its embedding in the national higher education scheme. Some of them even exposed the drawbacks of the system consisting in impersonalization of learning, focus on the process and not on the result, which contradicted competence-based approach; outer, not inner motivation of students, overloaded syllabus and reduction of the outcome of university education to scoring figures [2]. S. M. Vopiyashina and A. N. Malyavina admitted that the new system of assessment is capable of increasing the efficiency of the educational process, but it often collides with old teaching methods and Soviet attitudes on the part of the teachers, and post-school inertia and passivity on the part of the students [4]. E. V. Burtseva and O. A. Chepak saw the main problem with the score-rating system in the organization of educational process and specificity of Foreign Language as a university discipline. They argued that Foreign Language is a multi-facet subject and requires more aspects and criteria for assessment than other university disciplines. Nevertheless, in some universities the scoring system is rather rigid and badly organized across the curricula: the

same number of assessment points should be distributed between listening, speaking, reading, writing, vocabulary and grammar accuracy, to say nothing of the tasks meant for student creative development (projects, conference papers, etc.) within the domain of Foreign Language and between two or three tasks within the domain of another non-linguistic discipline [3].

When the majority of the authors were preoccupied with the problems of quantitative assessment, some educationalists became interested in working out the criteria and descriptors for qualitative control. Thus, L. V. Yarotskaya analysed the role of control as a structural component of the FL study programme and argued that the learner-centered approach requires new tools and mechanisms of monitoring the process of foreign language learning [15]. O. V. Baryshnikova considered the components of intercultural professional communicative competence and proposed new assessment tools in the form of socio-oriented technologies (business simulation games, project works, case-studies and professional task-based technologies) that can help teachers to grade the level of student performance [1]. A. A. Kolesnikov argued that both methods of assessment (qualitative and quantitative) should be used to provide a comprehensive evaluation of students' competences. Though the author provided a good set of tools for qualitative assessment, such as multilingual career-oriented portfolio, reflexive essay and reflexive map, he considered this form of evaluation 'informal', which made it inferior to quantitative assessment and reduced its educational effect [9]. N. D. Golev, on the contrary, balanced qualitative assessment with quantitative and proposed a new system of assessment which he called *nootheka*. The latter is based on the learner-oriented approach and targets student self-control skills as the main pre-requisites for successful performance. Combining cumulative principles of measurements with design formats the new system prioritizes qualitative assessment as the final evaluation of students'

achievements aims at grading the quality of their individual self-accomplished tasks [6].

Along with the search for new assessment means, domestic educationalists tried to find some other forms of control and focused on feedback. A. A. Korenev made a review of feedback-related studies in Russia and noticed that there is a dual-focus understanding of the phenomenon. On the one hand, feedback is levelled with information coming from students about their knowledge (just another form of qualitative control), and the best way to get it is interviewing. On the other hand, it is information coming from the teacher and needed by students to construct a view on their achievements or failures. A. A. Korenev admitted that in national pedagogy the accent is shifted from teacher feedback to student feedback [10]. We find this situation quite unsatisfactory, as traditional forms and means of control impede the development of learner-centered teaching methods, student autonomy and responsibility, motivating learning environment, and, in the long run, undermine the value of education.

Methodology

To design a blog assessment scheme comprising different forms of control and scales for higher education programmes, we grounded our principles on competence-based, learner-centered and action-oriented approaches, taking into consideration the systemic understanding of assessment as integrative process combining summative, formative and feedback forms used by both agents (teacher and learner) for the purpose of improving learners' performance, and raising the quality of education. The theory of feedback as a cyclic and dialogic process was basically the starting point for the development of the scheme.

The descriptors for illustrative scales were based on the CEFR requirements for B1–B1+ levels of language proficiency in written production and online interaction as well as on the Russian national standard in the field of teacher training. The alignment of these doc-

uments presented a considerable difficulty, since though they are built on the same principles (competence-based, learner-centered and action-oriented) and use 'can do' descriptors, they differ greatly as to the degree of certainty and attitude to overall student performance. If the CEFR provides a detailed framework for designing curricula and assessment of each level of language learning, the Standard gives too broad characteristics of a competence that allows of a wide range of interpretations, whereas for practical purposes precision would look much better. For example, in our focal case The Federal State Educational Standard for Higher Education (Bachelor Degree in Teacher Education with two qualifications) requires from the Bachelor graduates to master the 'ability for oral and written communication in the mother tongue and foreign languages to tackle the tasks of interpersonal and intercultural interaction'¹. As can be seen, the Standard sounds too vague and does not contain any specifications as to the level of proficiency or spheres of 'interpersonal and intercultural' communication. The only obvious requirement is that the university graduate should have aptitude in both oral and written forms of communication. The types of actions (reception, production or mediation) are not specified either, but the focus is obviously made on interaction. We made an attempt to align this standard with the Framework. The mentioning of the mother tongue along with a foreign language can be treated as a hint to the level of proficiency: "as good as in the mother tongue" or "not lower than at the mother tongue level", which corresponds to level C2+ in the CEFR. The task is next to impossible within the framework of Bachelor studies taking into consideration that some of the university applicants will have to mas-

ter their A1+ level only for two years with a study load of four hours per week.

The next problem with the Standard is that it presents student overall proficiency as a set of multiple competences, some of them being loosely related to each other, and putting aside such components of proficiency as activities and strategies. That is why when university departments distribute different competences among curricular disciplines, they inevitably make mistakes and miscalculate the expected outcomes of the educational process. To avoid this in our assessment scheme we proceeded from holistic understanding of student language proficiency adopted in the CEFR.

To incorporate learners into the scheme, needs analysis was carried out based on the qualitative data collected through student interviews and questionnaires on their four-month blog writing experience. The participants were junior education students in the field of Russian philology and the English language. Most of them were female at the age of 19–21. It was a mixed-skill group and their level of language proficiency varied from B1 to B2+. The students were asked to write in a free form what they liked/did not like about educational blogging and what improvements, if any, they could suggest.

Results and discussion

Blog assessment scheme. Based on pedagogical ideas concerning nature and forms of assessment and dual function of blogs being an on-line diary and a medium for providing commentaries from a more diversified sources and on a larger scale than it is possible within a traditional education, a blog assessment scheme (*Figure 1*) was made to facilitate university teacher control over student learning activity.

As *Figure 1* shows, the assessment process is segmented into 5 stages and involves 5 types of assessing procedures. The first stage is 'teacher content and error feedback on student's first draft', which is formative assessment. If student's text is flawless or contains minor errors it can be posted after the

¹ The Federal State Educational Standard for Higher Education (Bachelor Degree in Teacher Education with two qualifications) adopted by № 125 Decree of the Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation dated 22.02.2018. Available at: http://fgosvo.ru/uploadfiles/FGOS%20VO%203++/Bak/440305_B_3_16032018.pdf. (accessed: 04.02.2012).

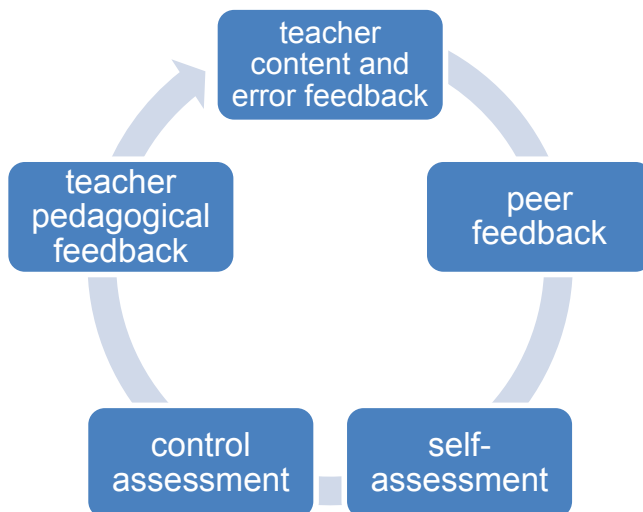


Figure 1. Blog assessment cycle. (Designed by the author)

teacher's control. If the text of the first draft is strongly deficient, the second draft should be produced and presented to the teacher. In this case the number of cycles can grow till the teacher allows the text to be posted in the public domain. After posting, the second stage takes place – ‘*peer feedback*’, which is also formative assessment. During this stage students produce content-oriented comments on each other's messages. The next stage is ‘*self-assessment*’. It is time for the student to analyse his/her own work and produce a judgement on its content, form and communicative effect on the basis of teacher and peers' commentaries and with the help of a self-assessment grid, which is summative assessment. Presuming that blog activity lasts for a term, students can write from four to five posts depending on the curriculum. Each post follows the same cycle and the results of the posting activity are accumulated in the student e-portfolio. At the end of the term students are ready to present the teacher an exemplary work – the best text from their portfolio for ‘**control assessment**’, which is summative assessment. The teacher grades the work making a judgement on student performance and embedding the results into student overall performance score in the discipline. But it is not the final stage yet, as

learner's improvement is limitless, and students need not figures, but commentaries and recommendations. Bridging this gap and encircling the process, ‘*teacher pedagogical feedback*’ is produced to inform students about their present achievements and future prospects.

Control assessment scales. As it has been stated before, control assessment is summative assessment, i.e. a conclusive judgement on student performance. In terms of the CEFR it relates to proficiency assessment testing a real-world ability of the learner. The other type of assessment adopted by the Framework is achievement assessment, which is the assessment of the achievement of what has been taught during the course. Achievement assessment is more appropriate for continuous control, but proficiency assessment is intended for examinations and final testing. Since our goal was proficiency assessment, we chose the scales measuring student competences revealed in blog activity.

Blogging seems to be quite an appropriate activity to meet the Standard requirement for enhancing interaction in written form in a public domain. In spite of multiplicity of dimensions in which this activity can be assessed, the main focus of control within FL learning field is communicative

competence involving both general competences (knowledge, skills and existential competence, ability to learn) and communicative language competences. The choice of general competencies for the assessment depends on the type of blog activity (individual blog or class blog), blog assignment (whether students should present messages on certain topics, reviews of books, films or art works, or make a journal blog) and skills that are planned to be developed in the process of blogging. We chose social skills as the most important competence satisfying all the conditions mentioned above. Communicative language competence, according to the CEFR, includes linguistic competences (lexical, grammatical, semantic, phonological, orthographic, orthoepic), sociolinguistic competences (linguistic markers of social relations, politeness conventions, expressions of folk wisdom, register differences, dialect and accent) and pragmatic competences (discourse, functional)¹.

As Table 1 shows, communicative language competences were strictly chosen and reduced in number, as assessment procedure should not be too long and overloaded with parameters. Depending on the level of student proficiency and place of blogging in the

course programme, competences can vary in number and order of priority. Thus, if blogging is part of a writing course, range and accuracy in the use of vocabulary and grammar are of high importance, whereas if blogs are used for intercultural studies, a shift should be made to sociolinguistic competences, notably politeness conventions, register differences, etc.). In fact, socio-lingual awareness is indispensable for any type of blog or task, that is why we included it into the scale. Pragmatic competences are also important and rather numerous. Being primarily concerned with the functional use of language resources, they afford a vast array of choices for the educator and programme-maker. Thus, one can choose relevance and coherence/cohesion as the most appropriate for a writing course, but it also can be flexibility to circumstances or turn taking.

For the assessment procedure we chose two-point and three-point grades on the grounds that not all the competences are equally important in a particular activity. From Table 1 it is clear that the accent is put on range and accuracy whereas other competencies are subsidiary. Again, the choice is in the teacher's hands, as he / she can judge about the particular situation better. In fact,

Table 1

Blog activity assessment scale (Designed by the author)

Type of competence	Criteria	Descriptors	Grades
General competences			
Social skills			0-1
Communicative language competences			
Linguistic	Range	Vocabulary	1-3
		Grammar	1-3
	Accuracy	Vocabulary	1-3
		Grammar	1-3
Socio-cultural	Socio-lingual awareness		0-2
Pragmatic	Relevance		1-2
	Coherence/cohesion		1-2

¹ Council of Europe. Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

the scheme is open to negotiation, and some educators would argue for including ICT competences or cognitive skills competences into it. In some cases, it is justified, but we should not forget that the scale represents a rigid set of requirements for the resultative assessment of student performance in a particular activity, and it should be made in strict accordance with the Standard.

The next scale we are going to present as an illustration of our principles (see *Table 2*) was particularly designed for a class blog of the third-year education students in the field of Russian philology and the English language. We proceeded from the assumption that all parts of educational process are interconnected and before deciding on the proficiency assessment we should consider the following: the type of real-world activity the students are going to be involved in, the level of student proficiency as a starting point for their development, the sort of tasks set before them, the expected outcomes, and finally the forms and conditions of the learning process.

The notion of language proficiency presented in the CEFR rests on two pillars, quantity (what the learner is able to do) and quality (how well the learner is able to do it), which are interwoven. The descriptors for communicative activities (quantity parameters) can also contain hints at the aspects of proficiency related to particular competences (quality parameters) and vice versa. Hence the educator has to calibrate different scales to identify the goals and prospective achievements for learners, as well as the assessment criteria for their performance.

As blogs provide two types of activities: written production (online posting) and online interaction (commenting) we consulted the CEFR as to what students can do in these activities. Assuming that the level of our students was B1, we marked their strategic development during the term up to B1+ level. The extension of the CEFR, the CEFR Companion Volume (2018), contains a new set of descriptors concerned with online interaction, collaborative learning and intermedi-

ate levels like B1+. The difference between B1 and B1+ learner in online interaction is in quantity (the range of topics, number of participants) and in quality (accuracy, fluency and the level of interaction: from mere respond to recognition of communicative intentions of contributors). B1 learner can produce 'personal online postings' on 'familiar topic of interest' and individual response to the comments of others in postponed time, 'provided that he/she can prepare the text beforehand; he/she has 'lexical limitations' causing repetition and 'inappropriate formulation'. B1+ learner can post 'accounts of social events', interact with 'more than one participant' in real-time online discussion and recognise 'the communicative intentions of each contributor'¹. Summing up this, we can make a conclusion that asynchronous communication of the class blog format is quite comfortable atmosphere for B1 learner (there are time lapses between the messages and everything can be prepared beforehand), but in comparison with the individual blog format it is a bit challenging and can be considered as a platform for future online discussions and forums with a wider range of topics (mostly social) and greater number of participants. Thus, through blogging B1 learner has a chance to improve his/her skills to B1+ level. Therefore, we included social skills into the scale naming the criteria for their assessment as 'Conventional awareness' and 'Communicative drive'. As *Table 2* shows, the former criterion indexes to student ability to behave properly in online community, and the second one meets the requirement of the standard to increase the number of interlocutors in online interaction.

The difference between B1 and B1+ levels in written production (creative writing) is in the genre of work: for B1 learner it is a story, description of an event, account of

¹ Council of Europe. Common European Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment. Companion Volume with New Descriptors, 2018, p. 97. Available at: <https://rm.coe.int/cefr-companion-volume-with-new-descriptors-2018/1680787989> (accessed: 04.02.2012).

experiences, but for B1+ learner it is a simple review of a film, book or TV programme¹. Taking into consideration that students are supposed to enlarge the circle of the topics they can write about and summing it up with the necessity to introduce new genres, we can set a task of writing a review of the film (which is both a social topic and new genre) in their blog posts. The next range of descriptors will depend upon this task specifying the quality of the work.

The descriptors for B1 level in general linguistic range characterize the learner as having 'enough language to get by, with sufficient vocabulary to express him/herself with some hesitation and circumlocutions on topics such as family, hobbies and interests, work, travel, and current events', but whose 'lexical limitations cause repetition and even difficulty with formulation at times'. B1+ learner is more spontaneous in speech, as he/she has 'a sufficient range of language to describe unpredictable situations', instead of circumlocutions his/her language is precise and rich enough to 'express thoughts on abstract or cultural topics such as music and films'². The distinguishing feature of B1+ learner in the field of grammar is a step made from recalling 'prefabricated' expressions to the capacity to formulate thoughts. B1 learner deals with more predictable situations (he/she uses the structures) and can show more accuracy if the context is familiar, but the errors of B1+ learner should not impede the communication.

The next two criteria are socio-cultural and pragmatic. The first one, marked as 'sociolinguistic awareness', was included to assess students' ability to make a distinction between formal and informal registers, which

is of paramount importance for L2 learner, as students generally enjoy the atmosphere of an unconventional talk, but do not know that it also has its restrictions. The CEFR provides descriptors for B2 level only, but we thought that they can be adopted for B1+ learner. The second criterion combines 'relevance', which measures student's ability to write to the point and correlate the contents of the text with the task, and 'cohesion' helping the teacher to assess the connectedness and logical consistency of the student's text.

Thus, our control assessment scale is norm-referenced and has a form of examination rating scale built by defining a descriptor for each relevant criterion which describes the desired standard or norm for a particular competence. That descriptor was adopted as 'Pass' or '2' (in some cases '1') and the formulations of '1' and '3' show the lower and the higher proficiency level correspondingly.

Teacher feedback. In the presented scheme, teacher feedback appears twice and has two functions. The first one is corrective (correction and error feedback) performed during the first drafting. At this stage the teacher provides indirect feedback to learners through the use of a code or highlighting to draw the learner's attention to an error. It can also be formative feedback on the content of the message and some implications of the genre. As students have a cumulative series of blog tasks in a course, the potential for teacher feedback grows from one task to another. It may take the form of a checklist describing student's ability with regard to communicative online activities, or formal assessment statement. The feedbacks and sandwich technique [19] would be appropriate: first comes the analysis of successful moments and best achievements of the student, then critical statements, recommendations, and finally gratitude for the work (praise-criticism-praise). The second function of teacher feedback is a propaedeutic one (pedagogical feedback). Its purpose is to provide students with preliminary instructions for some new kinds of activity (new genre of

¹ Council of Europe. Common European Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment. Companion Volume with New Descriptors, 2018. Available at: <https://rm.coe.int/cefr-companion-volume-with-new-descriptors-2018/1680787989>. (accessed: 04.02.2012).

² Council of Europe. Common European Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment. Companion Volume with New Descriptors, 2018. Available at: <https://rm.coe.int/cefr-companion-volume-with-new-descriptors-2018/1680787989>. (accessed: 04.02.2012).

Table 2

Blog activity assessment scale with illustrative descriptors (Designed by the author)

Type of competence	Criteria		Descriptors	Grades
General competence				
Social skills	Conventional awareness		Can act in accordance with the types of convention set out in online community.	1
			Is not aware of the types of convention set out in online community.	0
	Communicative drive		Can participate in sustained interaction with more than one interlocutor.	1
			Lacks communicative drive and quite satisfied with one interlocutor or does not have them at all.	0
Communicative language competence				
Linguistic	Range	Vocabulary	Has a sufficient range of vocabulary to be able to give clear descriptions, express viewpoints and develop arguments without searching for words.	3
			Has a sufficient range of vocabulary to express thoughts on social or cultural topics such as music and films.	2
			Has enough language to get by, with sufficient vocabulary to express him/herself on cultural topics, but lexical limitations can cause repetition and even difficulty with formulation.	1
		Grammar	Has a sufficient range of grammar means including complex sentence forms.	3
			Has enough basic grammar means suited for the purpose of communication.	2
			Has a repertoire of basic grammar means which at times are deficient in communicating the idea	1
	Accuracy	Vocabulary	Lexical accuracy is generally high, though some confusion and incorrect word choice does occur without hindering communication.	3
			Shows good control of vocabulary to express one's thoughts and handling social topics with reasonable precision.	2
			Shows good control of vocabulary but major errors still occur when expressing rather complex thoughts or handling social topics.	1
		Grammar	Shows a relatively high degree of grammatical control. Does not make mistakes which lead to misunderstanding.	3
			Communicates with reasonable accuracy. Errors occur, but they do not impede communication.	2
			Shows a generally good control of grammar though with noticeable influence of the mother tongue. At times makes basic mistakes – mixing up tenses and disagreement.	1
	Socio-cultural	Socio-lingual awareness	Can adjust his/her expression to make some distinction between formal and informal registers.	2
			Is aware of the salient politeness conventions but may not always do so appropriately.	1
			Is unaware of politeness conventions and formality in the language.	0

Окончание таблицы 2

Pragmatic	Relevance	Can write texts completely relevant to the task and fully inform the target reader.	2
		Can write texts generally relevant to the task and inform the target reader on the whole.	1
	Coherence/cohesion	Can use a limited number of cohesive devices to link his/her utterances into clear, coherent discourse, though there may be some 'jumpiness' in a long contribution.	2
		Can link a series of shorter, discrete elements into a connected, linear sequence of points.	1

writing, or new requirements). By reporting on what students have achieved and what they are to strive for, teacher stimulates their further development.

Peer feedback. Writing a blog helps students to observe how their views might be interpreted and reflected upon by others. Peer feedback in our scheme is done through commenting. We do not include correcting in this procedure because students generally resist being marked by their peers, even fear that this practice may spoil the climate in the whole group, whereas friendly comments on the content of the messages are quite welcomed. When students leave comments in their peers' blogs, they develop the feeling of empathy, which fosters self-reflection. In turn, that may help them become more criti-

cal and analytical in their own writing. Besides, to raise their level of communicative competence, students should increase the number of interlocutors and produce more commentaries. The number of the commentaries serves them as an index of the extension of their interactivity.

Student survey and ideas for student portfolio. The results of the questionnaire, interviews and observations indicate that the overall attitude of the students to the blog writing was positive and satisfactory. In the interview, most students mentioned that the blog project was a novel and entertaining experience for them compared with traditional writing assignments since its interactive nature motivated them to respond to each other.

Table 3

Students' responses (Designed by the author)

		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
Conditions	Visibility	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	
	Use of visuals		+	+		+	+	+	+	+	+	
Process	Informal communication	+	+	+								
	Peer feedback	+	+		+	+	+		+		+	
	Teacher feedback				+	+		+				
Results	Self-development	Cognitive skills				+	+	+				
		Communicative skills	+	+	+		+			+	+	+
		Creative thinking					+	+				
	Group-development	Unification	+									

As Table 3 shows, all students expressed great satisfaction with the fact that their writings were seen by their peers and they could

see the works of others. Some of the students wanted even to expand visibility beyond the scope of a class blog by inviting other contrib-

utors from a broad online community. The appraisal of their works by peers was also important for them. Only three students marked the necessity of teacher feedback. This can be explained by the routine of the learning process in a traditional format where teacher's comments always follow their writings and seem indispensable to any assignment. But it was pleasant to notice that some of them still need teacher's help even in new formats.

What they also liked was the opportunity that blog technology provides – the use of pictures, photos and other illustrative materials (not just a text!). They seemed to feel at home with all these visuals and in the informal atmosphere of a casual talk with their counterparts. They felt relaxed and more sincere, and as a result – more real and imaginative at the same time. They tried not to use ready-made phrases with trivial meaning, but to find language means best formulating their own thoughts. Most of the students reported that blog writing helped them to improve (or at least work on this better) their communicative skills. Some of them thought this experience was useful for their cognitive development and creativity. This group is not quite friendly: they are all individualities, but one person wanted to see them unified and expressed hopes that blog activity could lead to such a result.

Therefore, students are quite enthusiastic about blogs and seek an opportunity to develop their communicative competence in informal atmosphere of online interaction as an alternative to traditional classes. What alerts us as teachers is the degree of this informality and students' awareness of what the real culture of online communication is. Proper assessment of blogging could help not only teachers to construct a course programme, but also students to become more reflective in their studies and real-world activities.

Student blog portfolio. For the students to keep track of their writing development, e-portfolio can be used. Blog portfolio is a crossroad of qualitative and quantitative methods of control because it includes proficiency scales (quantitative) and other materials that require qualitative analysis: self-assessment of the level of communicative language competence, analysis and interpretation of peers' commentaries. The structure of portfolio can vary, but it will depend on the needs of the target group and the educational context in which the model is to be used. Our Student Blog Portfolio contains the following sections: self-assessment grids «My achievements» (Table 4) and «My postings» (Table 5), and «My commentaries» (Table 6).

Table 4

Self-assessment grid «My achievements» (Designed by the author)

Activity	Descriptors	I can do	I would like to do	Level of proficiency
Writing	I can write a description of an event, a recent trip – real or imagined. I can write accounts of experiences, describing feelings and reactions in simple connected text. I can write straightforward connected texts on a range of familiar subjects within my field of interest.			B1
	I can write clear, detailed descriptions of real or imaginary events and experiences marking the relationship between ideas in clear connected text, and following established conventions of the genre concerned. I can write straightforward connected texts on social or cultural topics such as music and films.			B2

Окончание таблицы 2

Interaction	I can interact about experiences, events, impressions and feelings provided that I can prepare beforehand. I can ask for or give simple clarifications and can respond to comments and questions in some detail.			B1
	I can interact with several people . I can highlight the significance of facts, events and experiences, justify ideas and support collaboration .			B2

As Table 4 shows, students are suggested to analyse what they can do and to relate this to the levels of proficiency. This reflecting activity will help them understand their present condition and plan the future progress. The key words in the descriptors are marked in bold type to draw students' attention to the most influential factors differing a higher level of proficiency. The descriptors here are much simplified in comparison with the teacher scale because clear proficiency framework is meant to develop students' autonomy and help them to orient themselves and set goals. It is a basis for individualizing learning, as for each learner there is an optimal level at which they should be working. It enables a shared understanding of levels, facilitating the setting of realistic learning targets for a group, and relating outcomes to what learners can do next – successfully perform a particular job, or pursue university studies using the language.

Table 5 presents a grid that is meant to help students be aware of the quality of their achievements. The judgement can be made on the basis of teacher feedback, peer-reviews and self-observations. The criteria of relevance, coherence, range and accuracy should be applied to every posting, thus helping the students to choose an exemplary work for teacher assessment.

The final section presented in Table 6 will allow students to observe the range of their communication activity ('Communicative drive') and to increase the number of comments they make on their peers' works. The number of columns vary depending on the number of students in a group. Variation also concerns all proposed scales and grids as they can be changed depending on the learning task and learners' proficiency level.

Table 5

Self-assessment grid «My postings» (Designed by the author)

Criteria		Descriptors	Degrees of proficiency		
			Low	Medium	High
Relevance		I can write texts completely relevant to the task and fully inform the target reader.			
Coherence/cohesion		I can use a sufficient number of cohesive devices to link my utterances into clear, coherent discourse.			
Range	Vocabulary	I have a sufficient range of vocabulary to express thoughts on social or cultural topics such as music and films.			
	Grammar	I have enough basic grammar means suited for the purpose of communication.			
Accuracy	Vocabulary	I have good control of vocabulary to express my thoughts and handle social topics with reasonable precision .			
	Grammar	I occasionally make errors that the reader usually can interpret correctly on the basis of the context.			

Table 6

Section of Student Portfolio «My commentaries» (Designed by the author)

Post	Number of interlocutors								
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9

Conclusions

The use of blogs, though a challenging task due to the specificity of this social media employed as an educational device, can be embedded into the university curriculum and FL practice classes in particular. Blogging activity in a foreign language corresponds to the requirements of the national Standard for developing university graduates' intercultural communicative competence and meets students' needs for informal communication and real-world tasks. However, simply adopting this technology without truly understanding its assessment is not sufficient. To bring blogging into pedagogy requires new assessment forms and means

rooted in learner-oriented and action-based approaches. The study showed how assessment of blog activity can be implemented in a cycle of dialogic forms: teacher formative assessment and feedback, peer feedback, student formative and summative self-assessment, teacher summative assessment and teacher pedagogical feedback. The author expresses hopes that the developed scheme and scales would help university educators to incorporate blogs into their programmes and bring more researchers and practitioners into the ongoing discussions about this technology.

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