2016

Using Blogs in a Heritage Russian Classroom

Julia Titus

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/rlj

Part of the Slavic Languages and Societies Commons

Recommended Citation
DOI: https://doi.org/10.70163/0036-0252.1080
Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/rlj/vol66/iss1/3

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Russian Language Journal by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.
Using Blogs in a Heritage Russian Classroom

JULIA TITUS

Background
Over the recent years blogging has become an increasingly frequent component in an academic setting, making appearances anywhere from English writing courses to foreign language classes. Research assessing the usefulness of blogs as a learning tool (Warschauer 2010; Murray, Hourigan, and Jeanneau 2007; Lee 2011; Bloch 2007) confirms that the blog format may offer many unique advantages, such as giving the learner a central role in the learning process; allowing the learner to practice writing on topics important to the him or her and fostering self-expression; creating meaningful and authentic context; extending learning beyond the classroom; developing self-reflection; viewing writing as an ongoing process by working with multiple revisions; providing possibilities for instant feedback and collaboration; helping learners transition from a more colloquial to an academic writing style.

Although the current studies focusing specifically on the use of blogs in heritage language (HL) courses are limited (Henshaw 2016; Lee 2005), their findings correlate with the larger data from the existing research on blogging in the L2 classroom (Garza 2010; Bloch 2007; Carney 2009; Pinkman 2005) and in content writing courses (Lee 2010; Churchill 2009; Hourigan and Murray 2010), indicating multiple benefits of integrating blogs in L2 classrooms and favorably influencing the learning outcomes. These findings also suggest that the blogging format may be especially well suited to a HL classroom for several other reasons. Blogs can easily accommodate various levels of language proficiency, since HL learners typically tend to be very heterogeneous in their language skills. Some come with minimal literacy, and others would have an intermediate-high or advanced level of proficiency, and both categories of HL learners would frequently be enrolled in the same HL course (for more, see Table 1), since it is not common to offer multiple levels of HL instruction in Russian at one institution due to significant enrollment fluctuations and staffing concerns. For the HL and
L2 courses comprising learners with varying levels of writing proficiency, flexibility and openness of blogging assignments can be a very helpful teaching tool: learners themselves can choose the topic, the length, and the style of writing that they are capable of producing, taking into consideration the existing disparity of language skills. Moreover, they can spend as much time on each writing assignment as they need, since they are working at home and are not limited by the classroom setting.

Because HL learners acquire their language first by hearing and speaking it in their parents’ homes, they frequently don’t have any experience with writing in their HL, or a very limited experience, having been taught to read and write at home by a grandparent. Writing is the self-reported weakest skill of the HL learners and the one that they are most eager to improve (see Table 2). HL learners understand that the ability to write fluently and correctly in their heritage language is necessary for a professional use of their heritage language. Moreover, acquiring full literacy in Russian also has a deep personal significance to HL learners, connecting them to their parents’ and grandparents’ culture and literature, and they are very motivated to it. At the same time, learning to write correctly in a foreign language is a very long and challenging process, since various formal elements of the language (grammar, spelling, syntax, vocabulary, style) are all reflected in a writing sample. To attain accuracy in writing is especially difficult in Russian since Russian uses morphophonemic principles of writing, and there are many particular features of Russian pronunciation (e.g., unstressed vowels that undergo vowel reduction, consonant assimilation) that present a great challenge for correct spelling even for native speakers.

Recent studies focusing on assessing the writing of Russian HL learners note that in many cases HL learners’ general awareness of the syntactic system, verb endings, and cases is generally preserved, although HL learners may be uncertain about which case is needed in a particular instance and make case errors (Smyslova 2009). At the same time, the HL learners at the lower end of the proficiency scale have very limited vocabulary centered mainly around home and daily life, and that weakens their writing skills, since the richness of the lexicon is one of the important criteria used in evaluating the proficiency in writing (Dengub
HL learners also tend to avoid constructions with participles and participle clauses that are not used in spoken language but are frequently used in written discourse (Friedman and Kagan 2008). The avoidance of participle clauses by HL learners is due to lack of academic exposure and opportunities to practice formal writing in the HL, since the participles are typically not acquired until the child goes to school. In a study based on the analysis of the data from UCLA Russian language exam, Bermel and Kagan (2000) found that even more-advanced HL learners frequently have deficiencies not only in lexical complexity and vocabulary precision but also in spelling and punctuation, which tends to be “substantially reduced.” (Bermel and Kagan, 2000: 411) That study also noted that English interference influencing the sentence structure in Russian, calquing from English, and inappropriate stylistic choices were also widespread in writing across the different groups of HL learners, from the more proficient group of HL students to those in the lower range of proficiency. Current research on HL (Bermel and Kagan 2000; Kagan and Dillon 2011; Montrul 2015) indicates that HL learners have significantly weaker control of writing discourse compared to their speaking and listening skills and recommends introducing more activities into the HL classroom that focus specifically on expanding the vocabulary and targeting spelling and punctuation. Frequent writing assignments of different genres and style registers are also recommended for this group of learners.

It has been pointed out (Warschauer 2010: 3) that writing can be an effective tool for the development of academic language proficiency as “learners more readily explore advanced lexical or syntactic expression in their written work.” This is an important consideration for an HL classroom where many HL learners already are comfortable with an informal, colloquial style and need to be encouraged to move beyond that register into an academic, formal register of language. Because HL learners typically have higher aural/oral proficiency, blogging can give them the opportunity to capitalize on their vernacular literacy and potentially assist in making a transition from a more colloquial style to an academic writing style that is unfamiliar to them and needs to be taught. This article seeks to explore how the blog format can enhance the development of writing skills in the HL classroom by analyzing the data.
from the blog posts of heritage Russian learners collected over a semester of study.

**Learner Profiles**
This case study was conducted in a medium-size private East Coast university in the United States. The participants were eight HL learners of Russian enrolled in the spring semester of the *Russian for Heritage Learners* course. At our institution all incoming Russian HL students typically are placed in my *Russian for Heritage Learners* course in the fall. The course continues for two semesters (fall and spring). After completing this course they have the option of enrolling in advanced L2 courses in the department. Before the beginning of the semester the HL students are given a short oral proficiency interview (OPI), and those who can write are asked to write a brief autobiographical essay. The textbook for the course is *Russian for Russians* by Kagan, Akishina, and Robin (2002), supplemented by readings from classic literature and contemporary materials. At the beginning of each academic year my HL students in this course also fill out a short background questionnaire asking them what language skills (reading, writing, speaking, listening comprehension) they would like to improve. They are asked to list as many skills as they want in order of priority; while some only list a single skill—writing—others list several. The following Tables 1 and 2 summarize biographical data and language skills in order of priority from my *Russian for Heritage Speakers* course in the spring of 2014, where the blog component was used.

Table 1 indicates that the HL students in the class had a very diverse background: three students were born in the United States, three came before they started school, and two came after completing several grades of school in Russia. This heterogeneous composition of the class combining students with various levels of language ability is typical for many HL courses, and it presents a great challenge for the HL instructor, since a lot of individualized instruction and specific assignments tailored to individual student needs is required in these courses.
Table 1. Background Information on the Students (all names have been changed)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Place of birth</th>
<th>Age of arrival in the US</th>
<th>Number of school grades completed in Russia (if any)</th>
<th>Years of formal instruction in Russian</th>
<th>Primary language spoken at home</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Andrei</td>
<td>Moscow, Russia</td>
<td>11 months</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>studied at home with grandma who was a Russian language teacher</td>
<td>Russian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katya</td>
<td>Kiev, Ukraine</td>
<td>4 years</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>Russian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anya</td>
<td>US</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>2 years at high school as a foreign language</td>
<td>Russian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masha.</td>
<td>US</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>Russian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alexander</td>
<td>US</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>one year at a university as a foreign language</td>
<td>Russian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marina</td>
<td>Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan</td>
<td>9 years</td>
<td>three grades of school in Russia</td>
<td>three classes of school in Russia*</td>
<td>Russian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dasha</td>
<td>St. Petersburg, Russia</td>
<td>8 years</td>
<td>three grades of school in Russia</td>
<td>three classes of school in Russia*</td>
<td>Russian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yurij</td>
<td>Moscow, Russia</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>Russian</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As seen from Table 2, the majority of the respondents ($n = 6$) felt that the skill that needed improvement the most was writing, followed by reading ($n = 5$) and speaking ($n = 2$). Listening was not mentioned at all by anyone in the class. This omission is significant because it
indicates that heritage learners are aware that aural comprehension is their strongest language skill and feel that it needs no improvement.

Table 2. Language Skills Students Want to Improve (self-reported)
Total number of respondents: 8

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skills in Order of Importance</th>
<th>First Place</th>
<th>Second Place</th>
<th>Third Place</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Writing</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speaking</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listening</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Since research also confirms that writing is the weakest for HL learners (Kagan and Dillon 2011), the HL curriculum needs to include a wide variety of writing assignments in different genres, from dictations and short summaries to analytical essays. In my view, a blog component could become a very useful addition for this category of learners because of their strong vernacular literacy, their existing level of comfort with “conversational” subjects and their inherent ability to self-edit relying on their grammatical intuition, and the blog’s inherent thematic openness so that students could choose to write on the subjects they find interesting or important to them personally. Another attractive feature of blogs compared to traditional writing assignments is their interactive communicative format that is attractive to the young audience accustomed to posting and commenting daily on social networks. Blogs also allow for more creativity, giving the participants freedom to explore and incorporate other media in their posts, such as music, video, and so on. To test this hypothesis of usefulness of blogs in the HL classroom, a pilot blog project was carried out in my heritage Russian course.

The Study
This case study is based on the data from a class blog project for my Russian for Heritage Learners course that took place in the second half of the spring semester of 2014 over a period of six weeks. The blog was only open to the students who were enrolled in the class through the online classes support system (similar to Blackboard). All the students
(n = 8) were asked to write one post per week at home on any topic of their choice and they could also comment on the postings if they wanted to do so. There were more posts than comments since commenting was encouraged but not required. The topics were selected by the students themselves and turned out to be extremely broad; they ranged from Mikhail Gorbachev’s birthday to Golos (the Russian TV version of American Idol) to spring break travel. Many students chose to embed the relevant media (music, video, links to Russian TV, etc.) in their posts, revealing that they were already very familiar with blogs in English. Over the semester, there were 27 postings total, 7 comments and 14 drafts (see Table 3). The instructor commented on the blog posts but for the purposes of this study, the instructor’s comments are subtracted from the total number of comments. Some students with more-advanced skills chose to work without any drafts, but many less proficient learners preferred to submit the draft to the instructor for feedback, edit it, and resubmit for a second review before getting approval for posting. The opportunity to work with multiple drafts considerably lessened the anxiety of students who came to the class with weaker language skills and it gave them more confidence to participate in blogging next to their more proficient classmates. Surprisingly, the most posts (n = 6) came from the least proficient learner, who came to class in September without any literacy skills. This result indicates that the student felt that blogging allowed her to practice her writing in a low-stakes, supportive environment, where multiple revisions were encouraged. She became very motivated and engaged in her writing, and produced a series of posts representing almost a public diary of her first year at the university. Through blogging, this participant gained more confidence in her language skills, and as the course progressed, her blog posts became more frequent and, as a result of this extensive additional practice outside the classroom, she made significant gains in her writing ability.

Because HL learners already have some grammatical intuition, albeit incomplete, self-editing can be employed with greater success in an HL classroom compared to an L2 classroom, making learners more aware of the writing process and drawing their attention to problem areas. In this HL study, after students submitted the first blog draft, the instructor indicated the areas than needed to be corrected simply by
highlighting the errors in bold and adding comments where necessary. After that the student revised the draft on his or her own, and then he or she had a choice of resubmitting it for another check or posting it directly to the class blog if he or she was comfortable with the second draft. This type of self-editing may not be possible in the L2 classroom until advanced language classes. The categories of typical HL learner errors will be discussed in more detail below.

In terms of assessment, since it was the first blog experience for all participants involved, students were graded holistically, taking into account their participation, total number of blog posts and comments, and overall progress in their writing skills. Multiple revisions were encouraged. This decision to approach blog posts holistically was made to encourage learners to feel comfortable in a new environment and lessen the anxiety that accompanies public writing. Table 3 presents the overview of topics discussed on the blog.

**Table 3. Summary of Blog Topics and Posts**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Total number of posts</th>
<th>Post titles</th>
<th>Number of comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spring break travel</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Панама (Panama); Балканы (Balcans); Рок-виолончели и музыкальные фестивали (Rock Cellos and Music Festivals); 3 posts titled Мой каникулы (My Vacation); Сингапур и Малайзия (Singapore and Malaysia)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russian politics and culture</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Юмор русских новостей и ПроекторПарижилтон (Humor of Russian News and ProjectorParisHilton); МВД Чечни обязательно нужны иномарки (The Ministry of Internal Affairs of Chechnya Must Have Foreign-Made Cars); Вторая Мировая Война (Second World War); Грузинская старушка и кризис Америки (Georgian Old Lady and</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Another noticeable trend was the scarcity of comments. This was probably due to the fact that unlike blog postings, commenting was not specifically assigned, and some students completely ignored it. Another factor that was mentioned in the students’ end-of-semester evaluations of the blog component was that complete openness of the blog posts allowed for great disparity of topics that made it difficult to comment, since frequently there was no connection between the blog posts. This finding presents another argument in favor of slightly changing the format of the class blog in the future—making the comments required and having some topics assigned by the instructor to create some continuity and discussion threads throughout the posts.

**Discussion**
Below is an example of a draft post of the student with very weak writing skills in the beginning of the course in September. This entry is from March, in the middle of the second semester of the HL course. The original punctuation and spelling is preserved. The instructor marked the errors in bold, and the student was asked to correct the errors and resubmit the second draft before posting.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Crisis in the US); О русской музыке (About Russian Music)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Foreign politics</strong></td>
<td>2 Экономика странная (Strange Economics); Израиль и Арабские революции (Israel and Arab Revolutions)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Personal issues</strong></td>
<td>5 Автобиография (Autobiography); Всё ещё ищу работу (I Am Still Looking for a Job); Привет всем! (Hi, Everyone!); Приветствую (Greetings); Вебсайт (Website)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>University life</strong></td>
<td>6 Шесть (Six Courses); Уже почти и апрель! (It is Already Almost April); Как время быстро летит! (How Fast Time Is Flying!); Почти уже и всё (It is almost over); Последние недели (Last Weeks); Талант (Talent)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Summer plans</strong></td>
<td>2 Летние планы (Summer Plans); Лето (Summer)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
If he were alive, my grandfather would have turned a hundred years old last Tuesday. He was the dad of my dad. He died when my dad was only twelve years old. This birthday made my dad realize that he knew very little about his dad’s life. He wanted us, his daughters, to know about his [own] life. Therefore he decided to write for us the essay about his life. It was a short biography, twelve pages long, written in Russian, that he emailed us on Wednesday. I was very surprised to see that he wrote all this. I read it with pleasure and learned many things about my dad that I did not know. He asked me to help my sisters read it since I read Russian better than they do.

Choosing to write on the topic that was meaningful to her, this blog participant was able to express her emotions and effectively convey to her readers her feelings and emotions, and even her personal reasons for studying her HL. This blog entry contains 110 words and 10 sentences total, of which 8 sentences contain compound clauses. She even used subjunctive conditional (если бы). In learning Russian, the correct use of compound and subordinate clauses constitute a very important development in mastery of Russian syntax. The presence of compound clauses is indicative of the learner’s ability to maintain a paragraph-length discourse, which is one of the requirements for the advanced
level of proficiency, as specified in the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines (2017). As was already mentioned earlier in the paper, for this type of HL learners, the goal is to move from intermediate to advanced level of proficiency, and in order to accomplish it, they have to make a transition from sentence-length to paragraph-length discourse and learn to use the cohesive devices appropriately. They also have to broaden their range of topics, gradually moving from personal and concrete to current events and abstract concepts. The blog entries focusing on these more challenging topics will be discussed later in the paper.

The question of stylistics and register remained more problematic for many participants. In this blog post, written and oral styles coexist side by side; examples of a more formal style—usage of subordinate clauses and conjunctions: так как (since), поэтому (therefore); several instances of usage of relative pronoun: который (who); and examples of a more sophisticated vocabulary: заставило осознать (made [my Daddy] realize)—are next to diminutive conversational forms of папа (Daddy) дочки (diminutive of дочери). Both of these are emotive forms in Russian, conveying signs of endearment; they are frequently used by small children and they stylistically belong to an informal family conversation. По имейлу (by email) is also very conversational and it should be replaced with по электронной почте (by electronic mail). In general, the close analysis of the blog entries demonstrated that such clashes of registers and styles are very frequent, since HL learners are used to relying heavily on their informal conversational skills (Bermel and Kagan 2000). This presents a particular challenge for the instructor since HL students need to become aware of the distinct requirements of the written style and to be taught to make appropriate vocabulary choices, despite the relatively informal nature of blogging as a writing tool.

The following blog entry comes from another student, born in the United States, who never had any formal instruction in Russian before enrolling in the heritage Russian course in the fall. This post was also written in the middle of second semester and represents a revised draft. The instructor marked the errors in bold.

Когда я кому-то объясняю, что я сейчас слушаю шесть курсов, их реакция всегда та же самая. Сперва, они смотрят на меня с удивлением. Потом, они спрашивают "зачем"? И, когда я
впоследствии отвечаю, что я делаю это просто потому, что я хочу, и потому что пять курсов было недостаточно, их удовление переходит в непонимание и неодобрение, и они называют меня сумасшедшей. Они совершенно не понимают, как кто-то может добровольно это делать. Эти реакции меня очень разочаровывают. Конечно, я не думаю, что все должны слушать шесть курсов. Но я всегда считала, что студенты в *** университете стараются достичь как можно большего. Нас не приняли учиться здесь потому, что мы допускаем или принимаем посредственность, или потому что мы делаем самое легкое. Лично я (и я думаю, почти все) тут, потому что я \textit{делала все, что я хотела и могла} делать в средней школе. Я бегала с командой каждый день, я танцевала пять или шесть раз в неделю, я играла в школьном оркестре, я была в команде "quiz bowl", и у меня даже был мальчик, и летом я работала. Все думали, что я немного сумасшедшая, но я была очень счастливой. И теперь я стараюсь также \textit{жить мою жизнь}. Я надеялась, что в университете мои сверстники \textit{будут соглашаться} с моим решением жить насыщенной жизнью. Но, к сожалению, это не так.

When I explain to someone that I’m taking six courses, their reaction is always the same. At first, they look at me in astonishment. Then, they ask, “Why?” And when I later tell them that I’m doing it just because I want to, and because the five courses were not enough, their amazement turns into misunderstanding and disapproval, and they call me crazy. They do not understand how someone can voluntarily do it. These reactions are very disappointing. Of course, I do not think everyone should take six courses. But I always believed that students at *** University are trying to achieve as much as possible. We were not accepted to study here because we assume or accept mediocrity, or because we do the easiest thing. I personally (and I think almost all others) am here, because I did everything I wanted and could do in high school. I ran with the team every day, I danced five or six times a week, I played in the school orchestra, I was on the “quiz bowl” team, and I even had a
boyfriend, and I worked in the summer. Everyone thought I was a little crazy, but I was very happy. And now that’s how I try to live my life also. I hoped that my peers at the university would agree with my decision to live the full life. But, unfortunately, it is not so.

This entry is 216 words in length, there are 15 sentences total, and 10 of them contain compound clauses. Lexically it has several examples of use of a more sophisticated vocabulary (впоследствии “consequently,” разочаровывать “to disappoint,” допускать посредственность “to allow mediocrity,” жить насыщенной жизнью “to live life to the fullest,” неодобрение “disapproval”). There are some cohesive devices employed (сперва “at first,” потом “then,” конечно “of course,” и теперь “and now,” но к сожалению “but unfortunately”). There is even an attempt to use rhetorical devices (лично я “personally, I…”). Despite several literal translations from English (делала все, что я хотела и могла “I did everything I wanted and could do,” жить мою жизнь “to live my life”) and one grammatical error in using imperfective aspect instead of perfective (будут соглашаться instead of согласятся), there is clearly a successful paragraph organization of the text.

Similar to the previous blog participant, who wrote about her grandfather, this student chose the topic that was meaningful to her personally. She was fully engaged in her writing and thus she was able to convey her point of view convincingly and clearly. Her post is written specifically for her peers at the same university, engaging them in polemics. This emotional quality of writing probably would not have come forth in a more traditional writing assignment, such as summaries and compositions on preassigned topics.

The ability to write on current events and abstract topics is one of the of the ACTFL requirements for professional working proficiency, and it is important to provide ample opportunities for practicing low-stakes writing on these topics. But since it is much more challenging to write on current events and abstract topics than on personal matters, predictably there were many fewer blog entries discussing these issues. In future blog projects it would be beneficial to preassign a number of posts dealing with current events to encourage the students to move beyond their comfort zone. Since one of the textbook chapters focused
thematically on the vocabulary for economics and finance, all HL learners in the case study were asked to give a short presentation on the economics topic of their choice from the news. Some of the students also chose to write on the class blog about the economy. One such example is below. It is from a learner who came to the course without any literacy skills in September and by March was able to produce the following post after multiple drafts.

To tell the truth, I never read about the Russian economy until last week, when I was looking for an article for a home assignment. I was surprised by the fact that the unemployment rate is higher in America than in Russia. But at the same time, Medvedev worries about high unemployment in the North Caucasus. What does it mean for America? How can there be more unemployed people here, but at the same time, the higher standard of living? I find it very strange. What do you think?

In the final post only two errors remained, and they are marked in bold. One is the usage of Genitive plural ending in place of Genitive singular (для домашнего задания should be для домашнего задания). The second uncorrected error is the wrong case ending for prepositional case (в России should be в России). This student demonstrated remarkable progress in her writing, and even made an attempt to transition from talking about herself, her spring break, and her time at home (a range of topics which is typical for an intermediate level of proficiency, according to the ACTFL Proficiency Scale) to a discussion of more complex topics that go beyond the everyday life of the learner, albeit with many lexical limitations and inaccuracies. The comment below on the Russian economy post above is from a more literate learner who came to the
course knowing how to read and write and who already had some knowledge of Russian grammar before enrolling in the HL course.

Честно, я тоже не слишком разбираюсь в Русской экономике но так как я понимаю, в России, на много больше людей работают на государство. И так, потому что в России государственный сектор на много больше, экономический кризис не имеет такое влияние на безработицу. Вполне возможно конечно, что я абсолютно ошибся.

Frankly, I don’t understand Russian economy too well either, but as I understand it, in Russia, many more people are employed by the state. And so, because in Russia the public sector is much larger, economic crisis does not have such an impact on unemployment. It is completely possible that I am entirely wrong.

The participant felt comfortable enough with his writing skills to publish a spontaneous comment to the post without any drafts. It is always very desirable to see the students engage in a conversation in a target language beyond the classroom setting, and that is the implicit benefit of online communication tools, where the response can be published immediately and spark further comments. At the same time, while the general meaning of the comment can be easily understood, overall the grammatical accuracy is lower in this spontaneous post compared to the posts of less literate learners who worked with multiple drafts.

The comparison of these two posts from the point of view of grammatical accuracy raises an important pedagogical question: if the goal of the HL blog posts is to develop accuracy in writing, then even the comments, just like the main posts, would benefit from students’ revisions through multiple drafts, drawing attention to the problem areas and forcing the blog participants to self-edit and self-monitor their writing. At the same time, doing so would unquestionably have a negative impact on the inherent instantaneous and interactive aspect of blogging as a communicative tool. It would be useful to conduct a follow-up qualitative study focusing on comparing the writing outcomes of HL learners’ participating in the blog posts without any required drafts to the HL group working with multiple drafts.
Conclusion
Several features emerged when looking closely at the blog postings. Students were able to self-edit effectively and paid close attention to the formal aspects of the language (grammar, spelling, punctuation). Their understanding of syntax also improved, since many tried to use subordinate clauses, conjunctions, and cohesive devices in their posts. The classroom instruction continuously emphasized the importance of paragraph-length discourse, and these attempts to create a paragraph-length posting were frequently carried out successfully.

In general, participants’ vocabulary, language complexity, and lexical diversity also increased since some learners chose to write on topics beyond their comfort zone (e.g., state of the economy, current events in the Middle East, Russian politics). In future class blog projects it may be advisable to have a certain number of topics preassigned by the instructor in order to encourage all HL learners to explore lexically unfamiliar subjects. The questions of maintaining the appropriate written register and lexical compatibility (сочетаемость) remained the most challenging. Even more-advanced students who completed several grades of Russian school frequently inserted conversational phrases and diminutive forms into their postings.

Most students actively participated and enjoyed having a class blog. They felt that they learned more about their classmates and they were always emotionally engaged in their writing. Even after the end of the semester some students chose to write about their summer plans, and that was the testament to a success of this project from the point of view of engaging the learners and providing the venues for target language use beyond the classroom.

The students were asked to comment specifically on the usefulness of the class blog in the end of the semester course evaluations (see Appendix A). While everyone liked having the class blog, the opinions were divided on the broadness of the blog topics. Some students liked the ability to choose their own topics and the opportunity to share their ideas with their classmates, while others felt that the blog might work better if a topic was selected by the instructor.

This case study demonstrated that while blogging may be a relatively recent addition to the traditional L2 classroom practice, it offers special benefits to teaching writing in HL classes. At present there
are no large-scale studies confirming the measured benefits of blogs in the HL classroom, but there are observable traits that point out that it enhances language learning by providing a new venue for self-expression, extending target language use beyond the classroom, increasing learner autonomy, and building self-confidence. The author hopes to inspire foreign language instructors to consider incorporating blogs in their L2 and HL courses and trying this new communicative tool. More research needs to be done focusing on the quality of the learning experience within the blogging environment to better understand the optimum conditions of using blogs in the HL classroom and to maximize the potential gains afforded by this new technology.

Appendix A

Comments from the course evaluations on the blogging component

Question: Did you like having the class blog? How can it be improved?

Response 1
While I really like the idea of the class blog, I think it could be even better if there was some type of weekly theme or current events topics we could all work around. Otherwise, it seems like the blog posts tend to be very arbitrary and difficult to comment on. If we focused on current events, for example, we could write about controversial viewpoints or issues, which would spark more debate and commentary.

Response 2
It was OK, but it should be more mandatory if it is to work well. People should be obligated to write in there at least once a week and to respond to at least one post.

Response 3
I think it was a good idea, but we could have had weekly assignments that we had to post on the blog instead of writing it up, so that it didn't feel like it was separate from the rest of the work. More instruction on typing on the computer could be great.
Response 4
I did like having the class blog. It was surprisingly fun to write blog posts and read my peers’ posts. It could have been improved by being a bit more interactive—e.g., requiring us to comment or respond to one another’s posts or having us all post about one topic.

Response 5
I enjoy it a lot, and I think it works for its purpose.

Response 6
The Class Blog is a good addition to the course.

References
ACTFL Russian Proficiency Guidelines. 2012. Accessed April 2017. https://www.actfl.org/publications/guidelines-and-manuals/actfl-proficiency-guidelines-2012/russian/%D0%BF%D0%B8%D1%81%D1%8C%D0%BC%D0%BE.


