

**‘Embedding wellbeing’ in the French language curriculum  
How to help first year university students develop their perception of learning,  
motivation and self-efficacy**

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**Abstract**

*Research carried out by one of the authors shows that when students flourish their positive wellbeing will support their learning, allowing them to engage with the different tasks set and to develop their sense of self-efficacy (Thompson & Vailes 2019, Vailes 2017). This article aims, first, at introducing the concepts of self-efficacy and wellbeing essentials, their relevance, and the urgent need to fully incorporate them as part of the language curriculum. Secondly, we share our experience of creating a new first year French Language curriculum in the School of Modern Languages at the University of Bristol, and, finally, reflect on the findings of the research conducted throughout the 2019-2020 academic year. The curriculum can either support or impair one’s wellbeing depending on whether it does or does not cultivate students’ autonomous motivation and enables students to encounter regular competence, autonomy, relationships and belonging. (Larcombe et al. 2017). Our overall conclusion is that this new approach to the French language curriculum empowers students to develop further confidence in their skills and their ability to learn effectively, thus demonstrating great ‘learning gains’.*

**Keywords:** *self-efficacy, wellbeing essentials, embedding wellbeing in the language curriculum, awareness and attitudes, learning gains*

**Introduction**

This article draws heavily on the ongoing work conducted by one of the authors into what leads some students to flourish and some to languish at university (Vailes 2017). Vailes combines her work as Director of French language teaching at the University of Bristol with broader investigation into wellbeing in education in response to the now well documented mental health crisis in UK universities. This research in the UK context led to an encounter with similar work in Australia (Larcombe et al. 2017) which has informed her subsequent approach and is discussed in further detail below.

Houghton and Anderson (2017) have argued persuasively that considering the links between mental wellbeing and learning when designing and teaching the curriculum can foster and promote the notion of equitable success for all students and staff. In response to this need, English-based universities and colleges have started collaborating with Advanced HE in a project entitled ‘Embedding Wellbeing in the Curriculum’.

This paper investigates the content and potential benefits of a program that similarly aims at embedding wellbeing in the French Language curriculum and to foster the development of first year French Language students’ perception of the five well-being essentials introduced by Larcombe et al. in their Enhancing Student Well-being Handbook: autonomous motivation, competence, autonomy, positive relationships and a sense of belonging. We will first look at the notion of self-efficacy, motivation and wellbeing essentials rooted in the development of the new French Language program at the University of Bristol. We provide a general description of the new curriculum, an analysis of the students’ feedback, and future recommendations. The overall aim is to demonstrate that embedding

wellbeing in the curriculum is required not simply to help students transition effectively into university life but also to support young people's mental health in a wider context.

### **Theoretical background**

Self-efficacy is a concept that emerged from the work of Albert Bandura, a psychologist who recognized its importance for human wellbeing. Self-efficacy is defined as an individual's belief (or confidence) that they have the motivation, intellectual capabilities and vitality needed to successfully undertake an activity within a specific situation (Bandura 1994, 1997, Stajkovic & Luthans 1998a, 1998b).

Research suggests that self-efficacy clearly increases and improves motivation, a concept which numerous scholars have identified as a key factor in academic success (Murphy & Alexander 2000). For example, students' intrinsic motivation and high subjective task-value have been shown to be associated with both their enjoyment of and high effort spent on school activities (Deci et al. 1991, Meece, Wigfield, & Eccles 1990) as well as with their academic achievement (Gottfried 1990, Gottfried, Fleming, & Gottfried 1994). Likewise, the concept of intrinsic motivation (Deci et al. 1991, Gottfried 1990) was introduced to discuss the level of motivation an individual will have for academic subjects. Larcombe et al. (2017) call this autonomous motivation and state that we automatically become motivated when we do things because we find the activity intrinsically interesting or satisfying, or when we believe our actions will facilitate valued goals. They add that we experience competence (self-efficacy) when we manage interactions, tasks, and challenges that we face effectively.

Larcombe et al. (2017) add three concepts to the concepts of self-efficacy and autonomous motivation; stating that students' mental wellbeing and academic achievement are both heightened by learning environments that actively foster five wellbeing essentials:

Belonging is used to describe the feeling we experience when we feel accepted and valued by others within social groups and organizations. We develop and achieve positive relationships when we trust, rely on and care for others and believe others trust, rely on or care for us. Finally, autonomy is felt when our actions, tasks and goals are self-chosen and self-concordant (authentic), rather than imposed or controlled by others (p. 8).

The new French Language curriculum which was implemented in the French Department at Bristol University strives to embed these concepts and this framework with the aim at enhancing the autonomous motivation of Year 1 French Language students and of ensuring that it is backed by continuous relatedness, autonomy and competence (Vansteenkiste, Lens & Deci 2006, Deci & Ryan 1997) hence creating a stronger sense of belonging within the French Language community. This should also enable individuals within that community to also develop an authentic sense of individual identity as learners and linguists. Brownell and Tanner (2012: 341) state that "Identity is not a stagnant property, but rather an entity that changes with time, often going through stages, and is continuously modified based on the surrounding environment". Although this new curriculum resolves to help students improve the above competences and skills, it also intends to encourage students to establish a new sense of identity: that of a language learner and linguist as well as an independent critical thinker.

### **Methodology**

First-year French language degree students at the University of Bristol have a compulsory French language module. It represents three hours of language teaching a week. Up until 2018-19, language skills were taught separately: students had three one-hour weekly seminars: one for reading and writing, one for speaking and listening and one for grammar and linguistic skills. Group size varied: from 16 to 20 students for reading-writing, 8 to 10 for listening-speaking and 25 to 30 for grammar and linguistic skills. Students could thus have up to three different language tutors for their French language module and be with different peers for each seminar group.

During the academic year 2018-19, a review was conducted amongst the French language teaching team to evaluate the need for a revised first year language curriculum to improve the students' learning experience (O'Neill 2015: 18) and develop positive strategies to support a successful transition into Higher Education (Ming 2015). The perceived challenges linked to the existing program were the following:

- Teaching skills in isolation was perceived by tutors as challenging and unnatural.
- Tutors felt too much time was spent doing and correcting exam type exercises in class rather than engaging in meaningful activities.
- One-hour seminars only allowed for a limited number of in-class activities and gave too little time for in-depth learning.
- Students had limited opportunities to get to know each other and their tutor well, which negatively impacted the development of a learning community.
- Although students would complete the homework and in-class activities as expected, some seemed to lack the motivation to fully engage in the learning process during the seminar sessions.
- Most activities from the first week of teaching onwards were aimed at preparing students to their final year exam and labelled accordingly, developing a 'teaching to test' philosophy.
- Some students appeared overly anxious about their end of year language exam and results, demonstrating a 'learning to test' mentality.

When designing a new curriculum, a reflection on both what to teach and how to teach it is essential to support student wellbeing (Larcombe et al. 2017). As the assessment format could not be changed due to institutional constraints, there was little flexibility in changing what to teach as we need to maintain constructive alignment between the intended learning outcomes and the assessments tasks (Biggs & Tang 2011: 11). It was therefore decided to focus on 'how to teach' in order to foster a "learning climate that nurtures and sustains autonomous motivation through regular experiences of belonging, positive relationships, autonomy and competence" (Larcombe et al. 2017).

The revised module was piloted during the 2019-20 academic year with 156 students in the first year of their French language degree at university. Due to institutional constraints, the grammar and linguistic skills weekly seminar was not included in this project.

The two separate one-hour weekly seminars (reading-writing and listening-speaking) became a weekly two-hour integrated skills seminar as such pedagogical approach "treats the language as a mean of communication and interaction which boosts the motivation and confidence of learners" (Gautam 2019).

Seminar size was limited to 12-15 students and taught by one tutor. The aim was to encourage group work interaction that "promotes a positive affective climate" and "motivates learners" (Ellis 2012: 185), in order to foster both a sense of belonging and positive relationships between students and between students and their tutor.

The students were offered a task-based syllabus that encouraged them to engage in meaningful language learning activities and foster collaboration and cooperation (Gautam 2019). A task-based approach also enables students to develop their cognitive skills (Sanchez 2004) which support critical thinking and autonomous learning.

As suggested by Larcombe et al. (2017), to foster their sense of competence students need to gain the necessary skills to become effective learners. Activities on how to learn rather than what to learn were designed to that end, encouraging self-reflection and peer feedback. Furthermore, the end of year language examination was not mentioned by the tutor until the end of the first semester to limit anxiety and encourage autonomous motivation.

### **Data collection**

Before the full project could be conducted, a full ethics application was submitted to the Arts Faculty Research Ethics Committee. Approval was granted but the committee questioned the risks of the project unintentionally drawing out evidence of stress, mental illness and ultimately affecting students' wellbeing as it was a wellbeing study. We reassured the committee that the study was not about assessing student's level of wellbeing but evaluating whether the learning environment we had created when designing the new curriculum actively fostered the five wellbeing essentials: autonomous motivation, belonging, relationship, autonomy and competence.

To gather data, an online survey was created using [onlinesurveys.ac.uk](https://www.onlinesurveys.ac.uk). The survey was distributed in class via the university VLE, a week before the end of the first semester, halfway through the students' first academic year. The project was presented to the students at the beginning of their Christmas break and they were given the choice to participate or not during this non-teaching time. All responses were anonymous.

Given the concerns raised by the Faculty Ethics Committee, we explained to students that the project would examine their perception of the new first-year French language curriculum and that we would use the data to analyze what had the most impact on a student embarking on a language degree at the university of Bristol, in order to provide solutions, make possible further changes to the French Language curriculum and foster the wellbeing of both students and staff.

The survey consisted of 42 items combining Likert scale and open-ended questions (annex 1). It was divided into six sections: 1. General information to gather students' demographics; 2. Initial motivation to study French at university; 3. Perception of their integrated skills seminar; 4. Relationship and sense of belonging; 5. Sense of competence; 6. And a final section to understand their level of motivation after 11 weeks at university and their overall perception of the module against Larcombe et al.'s previously mentioned five essentials of wellbeing (autonomous motivation, belonging, relationship, competence and autonomy).

Although the main objective when creating the survey was to evaluate whether the new curriculum actively fostered the five wellbeing essentials, we used this opportunity to gather students' feedback about several aspects of the module to evaluate its overall effectiveness. In this article, we shall focus only on the questions/answers relevant to this project.

79 students (50.5%) took part in the survey, principally female (87.3%) and from a white/Caucasian ethnic group (83.5%). Only a small majority (55.7%) had gone to state schools compared to 45.6% having received a private education. The majority (86.1%) had taken a French A-Level qualification rather than an International Baccalaureate. Half of the participants (50.3%) were enrolled in a language degree, studying French plus one or two other languages. The other half were single honors French or joint school students, enrolled in degrees such as French and English, French and History, French and Law, etc.

The diversity of this group may appear limited but is representative of the cohorts we welcome in the French department. Therefore, although the participation rate only represented half of the cohort, it provided a good insight into the students' perception of the module.

### Findings

#### Autonomous motivation

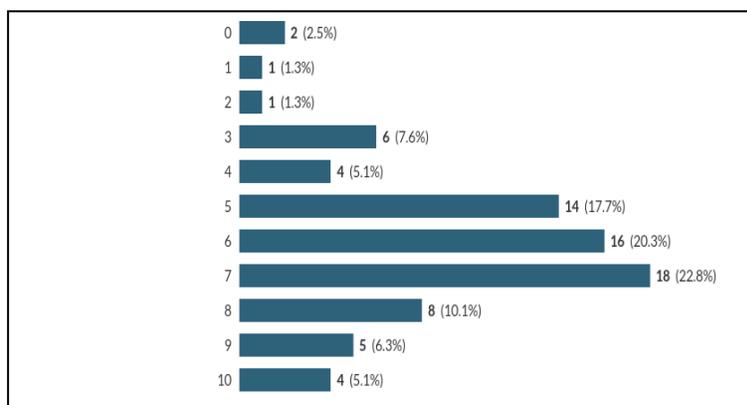
As explained earlier in this article, autonomous motivation means becoming motivated when we do things because we find the activity intrinsically interesting or satisfying, or when we believe our actions will facilitate valued goals.

When asked about their overall level of motivation for their French module at the end of the first semester, 64.6% rated it between 6 and 10, of which 43.1% only gave it a 6 or a 7 (Figure 1).

Question 37 - *On a scale of 0 to 10, how motivated are you?*

Not at all = 0 vs completely = 10

**Figure 1: Autonomous motivation.**



The data gathered from question 32 – *I enjoy learning new things for my personal development* – shows a high level of interest in developing one’s general knowledge for their own benefits as 83.6% rated it 6 and above. Question 33 - *I believe the teaching should be focused on what will be covered by the exam paper* – confirms this autonomous motivation as only 52% rated it 6 and above, of which 21.5% gave it a 6.

Answers to question 27 - *This seminar makes me want to practice my language skills outside of the class, in my own time* – rated 6 and above by 73.1%, demonstrate a high level of motivation towards improving one’s language skills. This is confirmed by the qualitative data collected. Many students commented on their interest in French language and culture, as well as their motivation to improve their level of fluency and confidence. They seem to genuinely enjoy learning French and to understand its practical value for their future personal and professional lives. On the other hand, some students justified their choice of doing a French degree by being good at the subject in secondary school. This raises the question of the nature of their motivation in pursuing a French degree.

Furthermore, only 54.5% found the seminars interesting and satisfying - question 36 - with 33% giving a 6 or a 7, and only 2 students (2.5%) completely satisfied. When asked if the topics studied in class matched their interests (question 12) and if they found the activities engaging (question 13) respectively 59.5% and 55.7% answered 6 and above, with a high concentration of 6, 7 and 8. And only 34.3% agreed (6 and above) that the seminar made them want to explore the topics covered in class in more depth, in their own time (question 26). In the qualitative data, students mentioned the mixed level of interest in topics and activities offered in class, the lack of speaking opportunities and the slow progression pace.

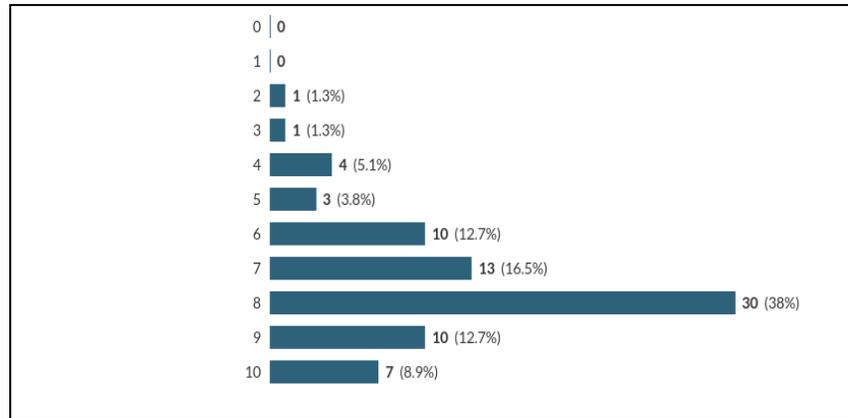
### **Autonomy**

Autonomy is felt when our actions, tasks and goals are self-chosen and self-concordant (authentic), rather than imposed or controlled by others.

At the same time as showing motivation, answers to question 27 - *This seminar makes me want to practice my language skills outside of the class, in my own time* – demonstrate a good level of autonomy in the learning process. This is confirmed by question 25 - *I believe I have a certain level of autonomy in my learning* – where 88.8% of the respondents gave ratings between 6 and 10 (Figure 2).

Question 25 - *I believe I have a certain level of autonomy in my learning.*  
 Not at all = 0 vs completely = 10

**Figure 2: Autonomy.**



**Belonging and positive relationship**

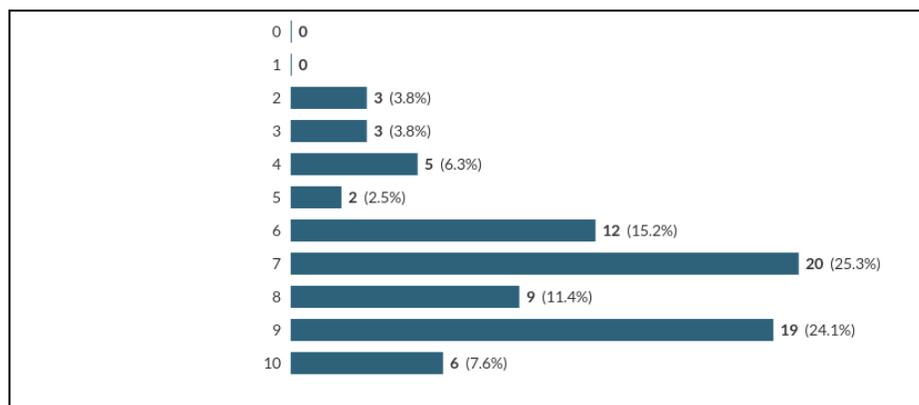
Belonging is used to describe the feeling we experience when we feel accepted and valued by others within social groups and organizations. Positive relationships happen when we trust, rely on and care for others and believe others trust, rely on or care for us.

When answering question 38 - *On a scale of 0 to 10, how included and recognized do you feel in your Integrated Skills seminar* – 83.6% of students evaluated their sense of belonging between 6 and 10 (Figure 3).

Question 38 - *On a scale of 0 to 10, how included and recognized do you feel in your Integrated Skills seminar.*

Not at all = 0 vs completely = 10

**Figure 3: Belonging and positive relationship.**



This may have been fostered by the pedagogical approach that encouraged students to interact and work with their peers. Question 18 - *I believe I am given enough opportunities to interact with my peers* – gathered 72.2% of 6 and above, with 22.8% of 10. To question 19 - *I believe I am encouraged to work with my peers* – 84.9% answered 6 and above, with 32.9% in complete agreement.

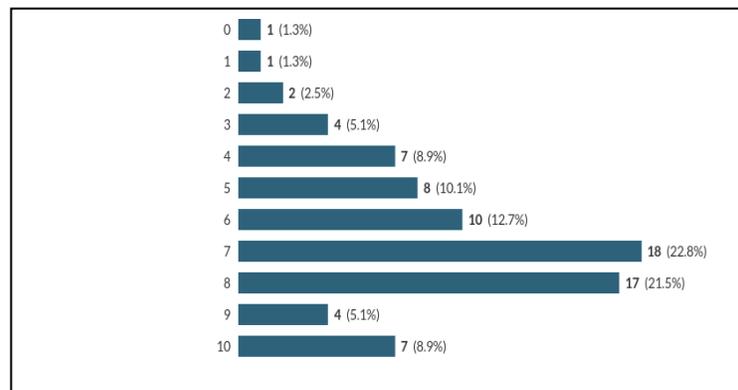
Yet, despite this strong sense of belonging, when asked how they felt the Integrated Skills seminar facilitated positive interpersonal experiences (question 39), only 71% scored it 6 and above (Figure 4).

The qualitative feedback highlighted that students tend to compare themselves negatively to their peers, which could hinder their willingness to work together and their sense of connection. This seems to corroborate answers to question 22 - *I believe I can rely on my fellow students in the Integrated Skills seminar for support (academic and/or pastoral)* - and question 23 - *I believe I can rely on my Integrated Skills Tutor for support (academic and/or pastoral)* – which showed a stronger trust towards their tutor (74.8% above 6) than their peers (64.6% above 6, of which 25.3% of 6).

Question 39 - *On a scale of 0 to 10, how do you feel the Integrated Skills seminar facilitates positive interpersonal experiences.*

Not at all = 0 vs completely = 10

**Figure 4: Belonging and positive relationship.**



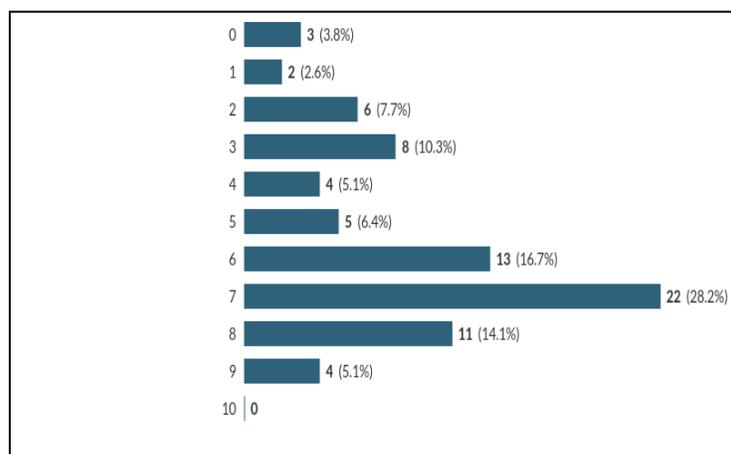
### Competence

Competence (or self-efficacy) is the ability to manage interactions, tasks, and challenges that we face effectively. When asked if the French integrated skills seminar made them feel effective and competent learners (question 41), only 64.1% rated their level of competence between 6 and 9, with no students giving it a 10 (Figure 5).

Question 41 - *On a scale of 0 to 10, how do you feel the Integrated Skills seminar makes you feel effective and competent in French language learning.*

Not at all = 0 vs completely = 10

**Figure 5: Competence.**



Answers to question 14 - *I believe I am developing new skills* – question 15 - *I believe the tasks are challenging at the right level* – question 16 - *I understand the purpose for the specific exercises I am asked to complete* - and question 17 - *I believe the workload for my Integrated Skills seminar is manageable* – all scored 70% or more above 6. This demonstrates that students believe they can manage the work they are given.

However, in the qualitative feedback questions - how effectively and competently students believe they can complete those tasks. Many students raised concerns about their ability to improve and progress at the same pace as their peers, mentioned their fear of speaking in front of the class, expressed their feeling of not being good enough and not as good as their peers, as well as their concerns about passing the exam and being able to complete the different tasks.

### Discussion

As we can note from the data, developing and implementing this new innovative program which attempted to embed wellbeing in the curriculum for first year students clearly presented some challenges. We had no expected outcomes as we had no prior data, and the discovery that students reported lower levels of self-efficacy or sense of competence (64.1%) and level of motivation (64.6%) compared to their sense of belonging (83.6%), sense of autonomy (88.8%) and positive relationships (71%) was an interesting finding. It left us wondering if students were valuing what we had done to create a positive learning environment, but still somehow felt individually inadequate in their studies. This is an idea that we will explore further in our future studies.

This small study seems to support previous research on the existing link between self-efficacy and motivation (see page 3 Murphy & Alexander 2000). Competence levels can enhance or impede motivation. A notion that Elliot & Dweck (2005) have confirmed, stating that perceived competence is the best predictor of motivation. The comments made by our students that they chose to take French at university because it was their best subject at school also strengthen this notion. Lei (2010) investigates the impact of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation on students' learning. The research demonstrates that intrinsically motivated individuals enjoy learning and discovering new information and do not require external benefits or enhancements. Extrinsically motivated individuals, on the other hand, depend on rewards and results to motivate themselves. Those two different approaches could have different impacts on the overall learning and performance of our students. Further research in the relations between the experience of competence and motivation (intrinsic/extrinsic) would be highly beneficial.

Qualitative data from future focus groups would help us gain a clearer understanding of what makes students feel more competent and how lower levels of self-efficacy/competence specifically affect their level of autonomous motivation. Questions on what drives their interest in pursuing a French Language degree could be asked: are they mainly extrinsically or intrinsically motivated individuals? Drawing from the work by Ormrod (2008) may help us to assess the specific advantages and disadvantages of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation and its link to our first-year student levels of motivation and views on learning and success. To understand if our students are more interested in getting good grades, doing better than their peers or are extremely interested in the subject they have chosen for their degree program would also prove extremely advantageous for the work to be carried out over the next few years.

The use of a well-researched self-efficacy scale such as the one successfully designed by Schwarzer and Jerusalem (1995) may also be required in future.

Looking at the results of this work, we will continue the development of the first year French Language curriculum by interrogating our teaching strategies, and will carry on reviewing not only how to teach but also what to teach, looking into content that allows all students to engage fully with the curriculum and realize their full potential. This might help us to gauge if there is a clear correlation

between engagement with the material taught and motivation. Of course, part of the problem is that this language unit is a compulsory unit for the whole cohort and not everyone is going to be interested in every topic. Also, we need to cater to the full ability range, which means the pace will only ever be 'right' for those sitting smack in the middle, unless we start streaming learners.

A 2015 poll by the British Council discovered that around 524 out of the 2,098 UK adults surveyed said that they felt extremely nervous at the idea of speaking in a foreign language whilst abroad. In her report Bowler (2020) states that the UK continues to trail behind other European countries at language learning. She reported that only 32% of British young people aged 16-to-30 feel self-assured when reading and writing in a foreign language. This is much lower than in the rest of Europe which has an overall average of 89 per cent. This cultural aspect may play an important part in the way students feel in the French Language classroom and will need to be explored further. Could this explain why many first-year students reported lacking confidence and did not like speaking in front of their peers?

Shavitt, Lee and Johnson (2008: 1103) assert that culture includes "shared elements that provide standards for perceiving, believing, evaluating, communicating, and acting among those who share a language, a historical period, and a geographical location." It would be interesting to see if there are subjective differences in our student population. One might want to explore if students enrolled on a four-year French Language degree, considered as language specialists, and students taking French as an optional unit as part of their degree, considered as non-specialists, have a different view on language learning and whether this has an impact on the feedback received. Does it also modify the link between motivation and competence beliefs?

The introduction of the conscious competence model whose origin is uncertain but has been attributed to Howell (1982) might also prove advantageous. Howell talks about 4 levels of competence: "Unconscious incompetence" - this is the stage where you are not even aware that you do not have a particular competence. "Conscious incompetence" - this is when you know that you want to learn how to do something, but you are incompetent at doing it. "Conscious competence" - this is when you can achieve this particular task, but you are very conscious about everything you do. "Unconscious competence" - this is when you finally master it and you do not even think about what you have to do, such as when you have learned to ride a bike very successfully" (Howell 1982: 29-33).

By sharing this model with students, we might alleviate some of the frustration which often surrounds the feelings of incompetence also known as competence frustration (Bartholomew et al. 2011). Competence frustration has been described as a sense of failure or ineptitude and disbelief in one's abilities. Research shows that competence frustration often leads to negative results such as disengagement and undermined intrinsic motivation (Fang et al. 2018).

In their 2016 paper Korean researchers Yu, Chae and Chang stress that perfectionism has a negative impact on academic self-efficacy, leading to potential academic burn out. It may be beneficial to incorporate the work carried out by Stoeber, Hutchfield and Wood (2008) on the adaptive and maladaptive aspects of perfectionism in any further curriculum changes. They explain that when self-criticism is associated with low sense of competence, perfectionists have a lower level of confidence after experiencing failure. On the other hand, perfectionistic striving is associated with higher eagerness and ambition and means that perfectionists have higher aims after experiencing success.

Finally, this year, two major events impacted the research we intended to carry out: the strikes in the second semester of academic year 2019-20 and outbreak of Covid-19. All the research planned for the second semester (second survey, focus groups and collaborative workshop) had to be abandoned. We felt it would be too difficult to survey students online and thought this might have an impact on the research results. We also feared that the online teaching would potentially have skewed students' experience and therefore the results.

The priority for next academic year will be to re-apply for further funding or to see if it would be possible to extend the length of the research grant so that we can conduct a more thorough

investigation with the next intake of first year students. It is also important to recognize that there is a real need to mature this project. The full impact of a new curriculum can only be measured after a cohort or two have completed their entire degree. We will therefore start expanding the embedding of wellbeing into the curriculum of second, third and final year and we are planning to ask the students involved in this initial project to answer the same questionnaire at the end of each year of their degree, to evaluate if and how their perception evolves with time.

Burack & Schmidt (2014) show how wellbeing is heavily influenced by context and culture. There are several important aspects to consider here such as the possible impact the Covid-19 crisis and the move to blended learning could have on students' perceptions. The recent report published by Widnall et al. (2020) based on a large cohort of young people during lockdown highlights a surprising decrease in anxiety and improved wellbeing. This positive outcome gives us hope that despite the move to blended learning with online and on campus teaching in 2020-21, it may be possible for the new cohort of Year 1 French Language students to show positive wellbeing and a sense of belonging when they start university next academic year.

### Conclusion

While there are clear limits on what conclusions can be drawn from such a small study, we appear to have created a positive learning environment, a strong sense of belonging and positive relationships within our Year 1 French Language cohort at the University of Bristol. This provided the context in which students should be able to thrive. Based on the work we have discussed here, the individual concerns of students about their competence and how to improve their motivation will clearly take more time and more work to be addressed. This will shape and inform our future research and teaching practice.

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