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A tale of tweets: Analyzing microblogging among language learners

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Abstract

In these days of ubiquitous tweeting, language teachers must consider whether microblogging is an activity that will bring benefits to the learning experience. Recent research (Junco et al., 2010; Messner, 2009, among others) indicates that Twitter is becoming increasingly popular in classrooms, but few studies (see for example, Borau et al., 2009; Junco et al., 2010) have empirically examined the linguistic, attitudinal or content-based outcomes of such implementation. This paper discusses the role of Twitter in an intermediate French class (4th or 5th semester of French at the University level), in which students tweeted weekly with each other and with native French speakers. The goal for using Twitter was to build community among learners in the U.S. and in France and to provide opportunities for creative language practice outside of class time. Data suggest that participants quickly formed a collaborative community in which they were able to learn, share and reflect. Attitudinal data and discourse analysis findings are presented to discuss the use of this medium in language learning.
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1. Introduction

Given that 98% of today's college students own some type of digital device (Bennett, 2011), it is undeniable that technology plays an increasingly important role in students' lives. With the surging popularity of Twitter, the number of tweets per week now averages around a billion (Smith, 2011); microblogging has made its way into education. Twitter is increasingly present in language classrooms as well, but few studies (Borau et al., 2009; Junco et al., 2010) have provided evidence as to how it affects the linguistic, attitudinal or content-based outcomes of language learning. This paper investigates the role of Twitter in an intermediate French class (4th or 5th semester of French at the University level), and specifically examines the role of social presence and its development over the course of a semester. We begin with a close examination of Twitter, which was used specifically as a community building tool. Then we build on previous research (e.g., Antenos-Conforti, 2009) to address the role of microblogging in the context of language learning. The present study adds to the existing body of literature by examining how community is

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established, using a framework of community inquiry (Rourke et al., 2001) to investigate the role of social presence in learners' tweets. Data from the study suggest that participants quickly formed a collaborative community in which they were able to learn, share, and reflect.

1.1. What is Twitter?

Twitter (http://www.twitter.com) is a real-time information exchange network that offers social networking and microblogging services. Through Twitter, users can send and read messages ('tweets'), which are posts of up to 140 characters displayed on the author's profile page and delivered to the author's followers. Twitter allows friends, family, and co-workers to communicate and stay connected through the exchange of quick, frequent answers to one simple question: "What's happening?" In addition to sharing the latest happenings, tweets often contain a hashtag, i.e., a tagging mechanism allowing users to attach a word or phrase with the hash (#) symbol to a tweet; hashtags can facilitate searching on Twitter. Twitter can be easily accessed from a computer with Internet connection, but 50% of all Twitter updates are published using mobile and Web-based tools (Vallee, 2009). Whether updates are made by phone, computer, or another mobile device, we know that Twitter usage is growing significantly: 230 million tweets per day are made by 50 million daily users (Dugan, 2011).

It is important to consider how Twitter differs from other computer-mediated communication tools, such as chat/IM (instant messaging), discussion forums, and blogging. With chat and IM, communication usually involves a point-to-point exchange between individuals or select groups. Communication takes place in real time and exchanges are usually short and spontaneous. In contrast, Twitter allows users to "grab ideas in byte-size chunks and use your updates as jumping off points to other places or just let others know what you're up to at any given moment" (Thorton, 2009, ¶8). Unlike the quick and short opportunities for posts offered by Twitter, discussion forums serve as a space to offer more structured postings on a given topic. These forums are asynchronous and thus allow more time for reflection and are not limited in length. Blog posts, like forums, often require a longer commitment per post in terms of time and length. Twitter may be perceived as a medium for short communications, since messages are limited to 140 characters. However, active tweeters may make multiple tweets in a given day. Unlike discussion boards, blogs and chat, Twitter allows users to create pathways so that messages can be directed toward one person (@), be privately viewed (DM), or be retweeted (RT), i.e. shared with others.

Honeycutt and Herring (2009) as well as Java et al. (2006) discuss some of the ways Twitter can be used, which they refer to as "categories of intention" (n.p.). These categories include daily chatter, sharing information or URLs, reporting news, and conversation. Given Twitter's growing popularity and the flexibility with which it can be used, it is not surprising that educators, and particularly foreign language instructors, have begun to show an interest in this social networking and microblogging tool. The goals of this paper are to discuss Twitter's potential role in education and to present data from a language-learning project to further explore this role.

2. Twitter in academia

The literature offers many overviews of what Twitter is and why educators might benefit from it (e.g. Stevens, 2008), but provides few empirical studies regarding its impact on academic endeavors. The National Education Association, which is the largest professional and labor organization in the U.S. representing teachers, recommends that Twitter can be used to help students "crystallize thoughts, focus attention, and make connections" (2009, ¶12) and points to examples of collaborative stories and projects that connect students in the U.S. with those in different countries. Other instructional benefits of Twitter include enhancing social presence, maintaining relationships, supporting learning, writing concisely and for an audience, addressing issues in a timely fashion, and connecting classmates and instructor (Dunlap and Lowenthal, 2009a, 2009b). Among the few empirical studies that are published, Junco et al. (2010) claim that Twitter can impact student engagement and grades, and encourage faculty to be more active and participatory.[2]

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[2] In addition to benefits, researchers have also identified drawbacks. Grosseck and Holotescu (2008) draw attention to a number of potential negative elements of Twitter. They suggest that it could be distracting, time consuming, and even lead to poor grammar skills, given the 140 word limit. They also point out that privacy and spam issues should be carefully considered for both students and the teacher.