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Facilitating Language Learning through Twitter

Abstract

The availability of so many communicative opportunities in the 21st century makes it possible for educators to rely more on online communication tools such as Twitter to supplement language learning within and beyond classrooms. The educational potential of Twitter as a communicative tool has not yet been fully explored in a variety of learning and teaching contexts. This article examines the effectiveness of using this micro-blogging site in an EFL setting. The study was conducted during the academic year 2014–2015 at Nizwa College of Technology, Oman, with a focus on how language learning could be facilitated and promoted whilst using Twitter as a pedagogical tool outside the classroom. Individual learner variables such as gender, specialization of students and the language proficiency of students in English are also important considerations of the study. Finally, some challenging issues involved in using Twitter are discussed.

Introduction

EFL teachers face many challenges in promoting L2 communication among learners. One major barrier is that many EFL learners have limited or no opportunities to use L2 outside the classroom. However, the pervasive nature of mobile technologies and the Internet has changed the entire situation. Social networking services and applications have elevated the level of learning by allowing learners to access and share information through mobile devices from anywhere and at any time, thus changing the method of learning and teaching completely. Their application in educational contexts has not been completely explored, however, so it is important to harness them in such a way that it enhances students' learning experiences.

One of the most popular social networking and micro-blogging services is Twitter, which allows users to send and read posts of up to 140 characters. It is, as discovered by some researchers, emerging as a new pedagogical tool to supplement language learning. It presents a platform that allows mobile/laptop/computer users to engage, collaborate and contribute to a new way of learning. After registering, users can follow others who have Twitter accounts. People can use hash tags and can find comments about a particular topic from all over the world. This paper discusses the experiment regarding how the micro-blogging tool Twitter could be used to engage students and facilitate language skills like reading and writing in particular.

Study Purpose

Most students in the context where the study has been conducted prefer to keep quiet during brainstorming sessions rather than giving the usual, banal answers to the kind of questions the course syllabus demands. Some lack the ability to express basic ideas because they have limited knowledge of the world beyond Oman. Many find it very difficult to translate their ideas into English. Moreover, the vast majority of students do not read anything in English apart from limited sections of prescribed course books. Consequently, their L2 proficiency is limited.

The main reason that prompted me to use Twitter to facilitate language learning is that most students are tech-savvy; all own smart phones and all have access to the Internet. In addition, Twitter is collaborative, and offers a means to share ideas in a way that is compatible with the syllabus. Students can receive immediate feedback in the form of tweets from the teacher and fellow students. Twitter is also practical and flexible in that it can be used in and out of the classroom.

Twitter in Education

Some researchers such as Borau et al (2009) believe that micro-blogging and social media help facilitate language learning. It increases learner autonomy and promotes interaction and collaboration. It provides flexibility in that it can be used inside and outside the classroom. Moreover, a communicative balance is found in micro-blogging since everyone gets an equal opportunity to communicate, unlike blogs where most of the communication is one-sided.

In order to engage the present generation of students, it is imperative that educators employ new technologies in and outside the classroom. Employing new technologies in and outside the classroom helps educators engage the present generation of students. Online communicative tools have been very effectively assimilated into a wide range of learning contexts by many researchers (Garrett, 2009; Levy, 2009; Meskill & Anthony, 2010). Grosseck and Holotescu (2008) point out that Twitter is a very good communicative tool for educational activities. They use Twitter to facilitate collaborative learning in class, to stimulate ideas among the students and to discuss the pros and cons of using Twitter in classroom.

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Twitter's interactive platform has been used to share information about research and teaching and to help students learn the English language (Rinaldo, Tapp & Laverie 2011). Rankin (2009) shares some readings with her students to generate student discussions using Twitter. Ebner and Maurer (2009) show that students can have just-in-time interaction with their classmates on course content through micro-blogging. Borau et al (2009) use Twitter to improve the communicative and cultural competence of students. Ebner et al (2010) and Kassens-Noor (2012) reveal that micro-blogging can be used as a new form of communication that can support informal learning beyond classrooms. Twitter's mobile notifications and alerts allow both students and teachers to respond to each other more quickly on an asynchronous platform.

Fox & Varadarajan (2011) as well as Luo and Gao (2012) successfully use Twitter to encourage student interaction and engagement, resulting in an increase in shared ideas. Junco, Elavsky and Heiberger (2013) claim that Twitter can also improve student engagement, resulting in improved learning outcomes. Evans (2014) emphasizes that using Twitter in classrooms engages students positively by guiding learners to relevant resources and helping them make sense of those resources.

In brief, Twitter can have a positive impact on student engagement and is a very effective learning tool. Educators still need to fully examine the effect of using Twitter beyond the classroom as an active and informal learning tool in different foreign language learning contexts.

Research Questions

The aim of the study is to experiment with using Twitter as a pedagogical tool outside the classroom in foreign language learning. The study addresses the following questions.

- a) Does Twitter-based guidance encourage students to read more?
- b) Is there a difference between the writing competence of those who use Twitter and those who do not?
- c) Does Twitter facilitate learning outside the classroom?
- d) How do students perceive Twitter as instructional tool? Do they consider micro-blogging beneficial for L2 practice and what are their experiences using Twitter in a learning activity?

Methodology

The micro-blogging social networking service Twitter was employed as a facilitating and communicative tool in an endeavor to determine the potential benefits of integrating such Web 2.0 technologies in an EFL environment. First, a Twitter account was set up by me. Then I introduced the idea to the class. Almost half had never used Twitter. Others had been using Twitter for some time. All had used Facebook, WhatsApp and other similar services, however, so they were familiar with the concept of social networking. Students were asked to set up a Twitter account themselves and to follow

the class. For those who had never used Twitter before, instructions and YouTube links on how to use Twitter were provided. I had to divide the whole class into two different groups based on gender as required by the cultural policy of the College. The main purpose of this experiment was to facilitate the writing skills of students. Therefore, writing samples of students' persuasive essays and description of graphs were collected. At the end of the course, a questionnaire (consisting of Likert-scale and open-ended questions/statements) was administered to assess and understand students' attitudes towards the effectiveness of micro-blogging as a means of encouraging reading and writing, promoting communication, learning and motivation. The statements were set at a five-point scale ranging from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree'.

The topics that were taught to students during this period were a persuasive essay and a description of a graph. Every day, students were provided with a list of reading suggestions on Twitter in the form of web links to newspapers, blogs and articles. They were required to complete a reading assignment prior to class every day. The experiment required students to read the given resources in their free time and take helpful notes on the readings, post a thesis statement stating their opinion on a persuasive essay topic, and state three main ideas in the form of topic sentences. In another assignment, they were required to find out the trends in the given graphs and tweet about the major trends of the graph. They were also advised to monitor and respond to my tweets as well as to the tweets of their classmates. Feedback was given to them instantly to correct their mistakes and to re-tweet after corrections. The purpose of this feedback was to make students understand how to write thesis statements and topic sentences and also to help them participate well during brainstorming sessions in the classroom. Every day, some random tweets were projected on the whiteboard and discussed as samples to help learning.

Participants

The participants were Post-Foundation students of Technical Writing II at Nizwa College of Technology, Oman, and all the participants were native speakers of Arabic. Two groups of 26 students each participated in the study. The experimental group of 26 students registered themselves on Twitter, whereas the control group of 26 students

did not use Twitter. The experimental group used Twitter as their communication mechanism outside the classroom and the control group used in-class sharing of resources and discussion.

Limitations of the Study

The first limitation of the study was a short time-frame of only 6 weeks. In addition, the study was conducted using a sample size of 26 students. Therefore, I believe that replicating the study using more diverse samples would give better and consistent results. As the cultural restrictions allowed online interaction within the same gender, male and female students sent their tweets to their own gender-group. This resulted in interacting groups on Twitter becoming smaller.

Discussion and Analysis

This is an experimental study and the results of the study are quite satisfying for me as a teacher, considering the size of the class, persistent student use of Arabic in classrooms in spite of repeated requests to use English, and the EFL context itself. This part of the paper discusses and analyses the results of the study with reference to the research questions.

a) Does Twitter-based guidance encourage students to read more?

The study found that guidance given through Twitter encouraged students to read more. The result showed that more than eight percent of the students demonstrated a positive attitude and the increase in the number of tweets was very encouraging. Twenty-five percent of the students said they were able to read only for around 5-10 minutes. Eighty-six percent of the students mentioned that they used Twitter anywhere between 2-10 minutes to finish the everyday writing task on Twitter.

The first thing that might have motivated them to use Twitter was the appeal made to them to use their mobiles to read and write. As the use of mobiles in classrooms is prohibited, they do not use them for classwork. Prior to the start of the study, forty-six percent of the students had Twitter accounts, primarily for entertainment and communication purposes. Their use of social networking services, though in Arabic, was an indication for me that carrying out a Twitter assignment would possibly be stress-free for them. I felt that it would work because, given an opportunity, students would use

mobile phones, for example, to check meanings in dictionaries, to find out some information using Google, and so on. All the students used their mobiles except one who used a laptop to receive, read and respond to the tasks assigned through Twitter. Another thing is that none of the students said that they found signing up and sending updates difficult. However, thirty-eight of the students mentioned that they found 'typing' a bit difficult. This is obvious as most of the students use Arabic keyboards and have difficulty with English spelling.

- b) Is there a difference between the writing competence of those who used Twitter and those who did not?

There was a significant difference between the writing competencies of both groups. There was also a high level of participation during brainstorming sessions. In the Likert scale statements, the first two sections focused on the impact of Twitter on the students' reading and writing skills. In these two sections, the majority of participants (85%) indicated positive responses to all eight questions. Reading materials provided to students certainly helped them in brainstorming sessions as most students came up with different ideas based on their reading. In contrast, it was evident during classroom discussions that students who did not go through the provided readings did not come up with any new ideas.

- c) Does Twitter facilitate language learning outside the classroom?

The third section in the Likert-scale statements was on whether Twitter facilitated language learning outside the classroom. In response to the questions in this section, 88% of the students mentioned that reading materials sent through Twitter as pre-reading certainly helped them in brainstorming sessions during the class since they had been exposed to the same language outside the classroom. In addition, it helped them come up with more support sentences during writing as they came across a lot of examples in the given materials. Students also mentioned that the reading assignments helped them understand how certain ideas could be expressed in writing. It was evident in their writing as well. In the control group, 65% of the students were unable to finish the reading task on a daily basis and that translated into unsatisfactory performance in classroom. There was a considerable difference in the writing samples

between the two groups, mostly in the presentation of ideas. Thus, it can be said that the exposure given outside the classroom through Twitter facilitated language learning and some aspects related to reading and writing have definitely been improved.

- d) How do students perceive Twitter as instructional tool? Do they consider micro-blogging beneficial for L2 practice and what are their experiences using Twitter in a learning activity?

Though more than 85% of the students communicated to me on an everyday basis, they did not do the same with their classmates. They replied to the tweets, but shared them with their friends using only direct messages. One of the reasons given by the students was that they preferred sharing the messages with the students who they either knew very well or who belonged to their own specialization.

Students, during the oral feedback, mentioned that they found communicating via Twitter as good as communicating via any other social networking app in the sense that they could communicate with their friends or with the teacher in a relaxed way. They revealed that I was more approachable at any time because they were able to ask me any questions by just sending one simple, quick message. A majority of students (92%) mentioned that the instant feedback they had got from the teacher after their tweets helped them to correct their mistakes and increased their confidence. They perceived Twitter as beneficial and were happy to share correct sentences with their friends as a way of showing that they had learned something. Students indicated in the questionnaire that using Twitter created a sense of community, although they preferred to share the information with the same gender. As Fox and Varadarajan (2011) mention, Twitter facilitates interaction among students. In the final section of the questionnaire they distributed, students mentioned that Twitter use was an interesting and fun way of practicing their English skills. Ninety-two percent of the students felt that using Twitter could improve their English through such active informal learning contexts as indicated by Kassens-Noor (2012). While nearly 31% stated that Twitter helped them make better use of their time, others commented that they found the reading materials interesting. On the other hand, just over 46% mentioned that Twitter's 140 character limit was a barrier as the sentences that they wanted

to write often exceeded limit, forcing them to send two tweets to complete a sentence. Finally, around 65% of the students said that they would like to use Twitter in other courses too. In all sections of the Likert scale statements, only 11.5% indicated negative responses. While some of them stated that they were not able to do the reading assignments because of poor internet connection at home, some stated that they felt it difficult to use mobile phone keyboards. Some said that they couldn't concentrate on these assignments as they had to concentrate more on their core subjects. Overall, most students felt that Twitter could be a very useful communicative tool outside the classroom for improve their English language skills.

An open ended question asking about which aspects of Twitter were considered the most valuable during the time of their study yielded a variety of responses. A considerable percentage (over 69%) liked two things; "communicating with the teacher at any time" and "getting instant feedback from the teacher". They considered Twitter a tool through which they could get guidance and instructions from the teacher. The second most preferred feature was 'reading materials shared through Twitter' as 61% of the students mentioned that these materials helped them in getting "a lot of new information". They also added that these links led them to some other links by using hash tags, which gave them some extra and useful information. It was pointed out by students that this information helped them participate in brainstorming sessions. More than half of the students mentioned that it also helped them in their writing. Around 70% liked the idea of sharing information with the teacher, but not with all students. Other things mentioned by students were that they were able to share information in class; the activities were interesting and motivating. They also commented that the activities were enjoyable and informative, and helped them learn the language. Some students also said that they felt shy about asking verbal questions in classroom, but did not feel the same about asking through Twitter. Overall, their experience in using Twitter in learning activities was very encouraging.

Conclusion

This study was an attempt to expand the opportunities for students to use L2 outside the classroom. The aim of the study was to determine whether

Twitter can be used to facilitate language learning outside the classroom. The results indicate that students responded positively to the use of Twitter outside the classroom to enhance their reading and writing skills. Firstly, Twitter enabled the researcher to share web links, audio, video and text-based content with the students. Secondly, students were not only able to formulate better and more supporting sentences for their topic sentences and thesis statement, but they were also able to get immediate feedback and correction from the teacher. Thirdly, most of the students developed the ability to manage their time by reading the materials and sending tweets related to the topics discussed. Finally, it gave them more confidence as they participated in brainstorming sessions without any inhibitions.

There is no doubt that Twitter acts a facilitator for students in language learning outside the classroom. Micro-blogging, in a controlled situation, offers language learners an easy way to communicate with teachers beyond classroom hours. This experiment was feasible in the sense that students had to write just a few sentences every day showing their understanding of the reading materials. Their willingness to continue this practice of using Twitter to improve their skills is a welcoming change because they get to read and use the language outside the classroom. Although this study was limited to a small group of participants, the findings reveal that these online communicative tools give us a lot of opportunities and inspire us to adopt them to help learners communicate in the target language. Finally, Twitter can be used innovatively and effectively in a foreign language learning context to meet educational goals appropriately.

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