11 Twitter as a formal and informal language learning tool: from potential to evidence

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Abstract

Twitter[2] can be used as a language learning tool and this potential has been identified by a number of scholars. This chapter presents an overview of the identified potential of Twitter as a language learning tool and presents an overview of different studies carried out to provide evidence of language learning using Twitter in different contexts. It concludes that, although there is evidence of language acquisition in formal contexts, more research is needed to inform how Twitter is used in informal settings.

Keywords: Twitter, language learning, autonomous learning, social media, microblogging.

1.   Introduction

Twitter is a multi-platform Social Networking Site (SNS) available to users from a range of devices, mobile or not. Users can post short messages (tweets) made up of up to 280 characters (the limit was 140 characters until November 2017). Twitter supports sharing photographs and video (including live streaming), hyperlinks to online resources, and creating short polls. Since Twitter was launched in 2006, the microblogging tool has gone from being a little-known service to a world-wide phenomenon with massive impact on news, politics,

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business, entertainment, sports, and education among many other fields. By 2017, Twitter had 330 million monthly active users, with 80% of users accessing the tool from mobile devices (Twitter, 2017). Users utilise hashtags to make the topics of their tweets more visible and searchable, and Twitter lists the most popular issues being discussed as trending topics, with geographical variations to reflect different issues around the world.

Due to affordances such as hosting media-rich resources, and private and public communication, Twitter, like other SNSs such as Facebook, can be used as a medium for both formal and informal learning. In this chapter, formal learning is defined as learning directed by an educator in a formal setting, such as a school or university, and informal learning as learning that is self-directed by the learner, who takes charge of the initiatives and activities they undertake towards learning (also referred to as self-directed learning and autonomous learning). It has been acknowledged that "informal education plays a key role for language learning" (European Commission, 2012, p. 16), and this chapter will evaluate the potential of Twitter for language learning and the evidence found so far to support whether that potential is being realised.

2.   Twitter and language learning

In the early days of Twitter, English was the dominant language used in this platform. In 2006, 98% of tweets were written in English (GNIP, 2014). Seven years later, although still the most used language on Twitter, the proportion of tweets in English had fallen to 51%, followed by Japanese (14.8%), Spanish (13.4%), Portuguese (5.1%), Indonesian (3.2%), Arabic (3.2%), French (2.4%), Turkish (1.8%), Russian (1.3%), and Korean (1.1%) (GNIP, 2014). Twitter currently supports 40 different languages (Twitter, 2017) and also offers a translation tool that identifies the language of the tweet and translates it to the default language of the user's account.

The 140-character limit that characterised tweets for its first decade was seen as both an advantage and a hindrance. While some detractors felt that it stopped the

natural flow of language and could lead to the use of bad grammar (Grosseck & Holotescu, 2008), other authors claimed that the limit encouraged more precise thinking, editing, and synthesising of language (Dunlap & Lowenthal, 2009, Plutino, 2017). The language used to tweet is determinant of how restrictive the character limit is: whereas in some languages this limited the message to just a few words, in other languages such as Chinese or Japanese, 140 characters allow for much more content to be expressed, most likely the reason why the limit remains at 140 characters for languages such as Chinese, Japanese, and Korean, even after November 2017.

Many authors have highlighted the potential of Twitter in particular as a tool for language learning (Borau, Ullrich, Feng, & Shen, 2009; Dickens, 2008; Harmandaoglu, 2012; Newgarden, 2009). Craig (2012) differentiated between linguistic benefits (noticing vocabulary, expressions, idioms, and grammar), cultural benefits (access to native speakers and insight into their routines, opinions, media, and general interests), and social benefits (extending learning outside the classroom, social presence, and distribution). Borau et al. (2009) proposed that on Twitter, language learners can access exposure to the target language and also learn to express their thoughts in the target language. In contrast, Newgarden (2009) focussed instead on engagement and participation in communities of language users.

Other benefits for language learning include opportunities to learn about current affairs, politics, or culture (Reinhardt, Wheeler, & Ebner, 2010), engaging in language play (Hattem, 2014), posting homework and brief questions to respond to, and intercultural information and exchanges (Lee & Markey, 2014). In addition, Twitter can help raise awareness of popular culture, and be used to share experiences of visiting a target language area (Plutino, 2017).

Figure 1 presents an overview of the different potential uses of Twitter as a language learning tool, some of which overlap. Although Twitter is primarily a written medium, the ability to livestream video and link to audio and video resources (self-produced or content from others), means that interaction is not limited to text.

Figure 1.   Potential uses of Twitter as a language learning tool
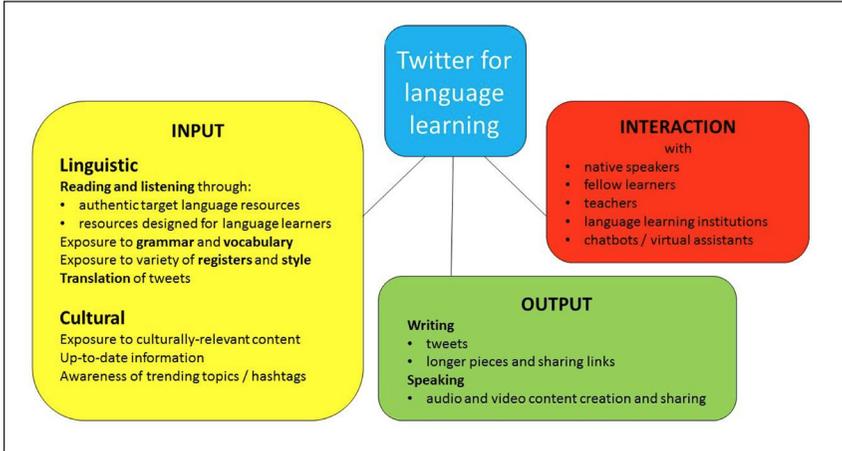
The types of uses presented in Figure 1 can be part of teacher-directed activities in a formal learning environment, in or outside the classroom, or can be undertaken by learners in an informal manner as self-directed activities. Doing the latter allows language learning activities to be learner-centred, as they can choose who to follow and what topics to focus on depending on their own interests.

3.   Evidence of engagement and learning

A number of studies have looked into the use of Twitter for a variety of areas of language learning. Some of the research has focussed on interaction among students and also with native speakers: Ullrich et al. (2008) carried out one of the earliest studies into the use of Twitter for language learning with very positive results: 94% of their students, based in China, believed that their English had improved with the help of Twitter. The students communicated with each other in English through Twitter and half of them also communicated with native speakers. Similar results were found by Kim, Park, and Baek (2011): from their study of 45 Korean school children learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL), they concluded that the use of Twitter had stimulated their mixed-ability

participants to produce output in the target language and engage in social interaction with fellow students as well as native speakers. Similarly, Antenos-Conforti (2009) analysed the tweets that 22 of his students of intermediate Italian tweeted, as well as the data from a survey into their experience of using Twitter. He concluded that the introduction of Twitter into his course helped the students develop a sense of community and encouraged participation, creating a virtual extension of his classroom. In contrast, Craig (2012) used Twitter over three semesters in 2010-11 for an advanced EFL writing class in Korea. Students were required to tweet daily and provide feedback on others' writing. Although students' knowledge of the tool improved, their engagement was very teacher-directed and the results disappointing; he eventually abandoned its use in class.

Jiménez-Muñoz (2014) looked into the use of Twitter to promote communication among students and tutor/students, engage students in target language use, and get involved in a more sophisticated use of the language, as well as error correction. He found an increase in both the quantity and quality of interactions in the target language among his students. In one of the few research projects focussing on the use of Twitter to teach pronunciation, Mompean and Fouz-González (2016) set up a series of tweets for their participants (16 Spanish EFL students). The tweets highlighted commonly-occurring errors in pronunciation for Spanish speakers: silent letters, unusual grapheme-phoneme correspondences, and misplaced lexical stress. Correct pronunciation was highlighted either within the text of the tweets or with links to audio and video resources. The researchers found high levels of interaction with the tweets. All participants who took part in both pre- and post-pronunciation tests showed significant improvement. Other attempts to encourage learners to improve their pronunciation using Twitter include the project by Plutino (2017), who encouraged her students to use the speech-to-text feature on their mobile phones to compose tweets in Italian. Although using this method slowed down the process of tweeting, 75% of the participants in her study found the process helpful to self-assess their performance and identify pronunciation and accuracy errors.

Other Twitter studies have focussed on intercultural exchanges as well as language learning. Lomicka and Lord (2012) carried out a study with 13 US students of

French and 12 French students of English using Twitter to build a community and language practice outside of class time. Their data suggested that the participants quickly formed a collaborative community that enabled them to learn, share, and reflect. The students reported that they had learnt more about French culture than in previous courses, gained confidence, improved their reading skills, and learnt from each other's tweets. They also indicated that they were more likely to use Twitter again for learning. Similarly, Lee and Markey (2014) carried out an intercultural exchange project between ten students of advanced Spanish in the US and 18 students of advanced English in Spain utilising a number of Web 2.0 tools. Twitter was used to make connections among participants, establish good rapports and build group dynamics, exchange personal interests, academic work, and cultural perspectives, and brainstorm ideas and make arrangements for assignments. The researchers found very positive perceptions of Twitter for these purposes and in particular for building community and interpersonal relationships, but some students felt limited by the 140-character length and message order, and one student was very reluctant to use Twitter.

Whilst the research studies presented have found some evidence of engagement with language learning activity and increases in confidence, community development, and language acquisition, most research into the use of Twitter for language learning has been based on activities that were teacher-directed. In many cases, participation was compulsory and in some of the studies learners had to create Twitter accounts for the purposes of the research. Whilst the data these studies show remains of interest, the evidence presented does not capture the more natural type of activities learners engage in of their own accord. Evidence of self-directed interaction and engagement with language learners and resources can often be found in the Twitter accounts of language learners, many of whom engage with language learning accounts such as those from language institutions such as The British Council, Alliance Française, or the Goethe Institute, for example. Some learners tweet in their target language and share news from the areas where their target language is spoken, as well as recommendations for resources and language learning tips. However, there is a dearth of research into informal language learning through Twitter, and that is an area worthy of further research.

4.   Conclusion

The recent doubling of the character count from 140 to 280 is likely to have an effect on the way users express themselves. It may reduce the number of acronyms and abbreviations used as well as the number of instances of 'bad' grammar (skipping articles or prepositions, for example). It may also lead to more reflection and less concise posts, thus addressing the concerns some researchers had expressed regarding the 140-character limit (Grosseck & Holotescu, 2008). The changes to the way Twitter users express themselves after the move from 140 to 280 characters will be an interesting area for further investigation.

Although this chapter has focussed on the learner experience of using Twitter for language learning purposes, it is worth mentioning that language teachers also engage in the sharing of resources and experiences through hashtags such as #Langchat and #MFLtwitterati, which are examples of teachers seeking and supporting each other for continuous professional development through Twitter.

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**Innovative language teaching and learning at university:
integrating informal learning into formal language education**

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