Reaping the benefits of using Twitter in advanced language learning[*]

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Abstract

The need to use and integrate digital literacy tools is critical in the current landscape of advanced language learning. Microblogging (e.g. Twitter) is one such tool that fosters student interaction and collaboration among language learners. This article will conceptualize the practice of tweeting, in relation to social constructivist theory and to new literacies, in senior high school language classes using CEFR's B1 and B2 proficiency level tasks. The perceived benefits of using Twitter for language learning will be listed. Guides to getting educators started with Twitter, suggestions for tweet tasks and connections for CEFR C1 and C2 advanced language learners will also be included.

Key words: microblogging, Twitter, language learning, CEFR, tweet tasks, affordances

Résumé

L'utilisation et l'intégration d'outils de littératie numérique dans l'environnement actuel d'apprentissage des langues de niveau avancé sont essentielles. Le microblogage (par exemple Twitter) est l'un des outils favorisant l'interaction et la collaboration entre les élèves qui apprennent des langues. Ce document conceptualisera la pratique du gazouillage relativement à la théorie du constructivisme social et aux nouvelles formes de littéracie dans les classes d'enseignement des langues secondes de niveau secondaire à l'aide des compétences de niveaux B1 et B2 du CEFR. L'auteur dressera la liste des avantages perçus de Twitter pour l'apprentissage des langues. Des guides d'utilisation pour les professeurs qui voudraient commencer à utiliser Twitter ainsi que des suggestions d'activités éducatives et des mots-clics pour les apprenants des niveaux avancés C1 et C2 du CEFR seront inclus.

Mots-clés : microblogage, Twitter, apprentissage des langues, CEFR, activités éducatives, bénéfices

Introduction

The following article is the result of observations made in a Core French FSL 11/12 split-level class in a Canadian high school over two semesters in 2013. This work was part of an assignment in a literacy and technology course that the author was taking in the Master of Education program at the University of Victoria. The assignment included implementing and finding the affordances of one technology tool while focusing on literacy skills in language learning. After reviewing the research around microblogging and second language learning, Twitter seemed to be the perfect tool with which to experiment. Since the majority of students are bringing their devices to school for social networking, Twitter was a complementary match. While working with Twitter, the teacher recorded her observations in a blog and a wiki. The observations included recording what was seen, heard, and posted. Photos of students' tweets were taken and students' reflective comments about Twitter as a platform were reviewed. Students' comments indicated that they liked seeing how many people wanted to communicate with the class and that Twitter was fast, fun, and easy.

In addition, Twitter fostered an engaging learning environment. There was an overall feeling of excitement as students looked at the Smartboard to view the latest in French tweets. No matter the task on Twitter, students were attaining proficiency levels as they eagerly participated in answering questions, checking replies from tweet-pals or adding a line to a collaborative story.

The Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), introduced to Canada in 2006, provides key language learning concepts and offers good practices and assessment tools for all language teachers. One of the assessment tools includes a thorough guide to proficiency levels (A1–C2) in all areas of language and cultural instruction. The tweet tasks outlined in this article are aligned with many of the curricular goals in the Canadian Association of Second Language Teachers' (CASLT) recently published *Assessment in Action: A CEFR-based Toolkit for FSL Teachers* guide book. This resource provides specific tasks for meeting proficiency levels A1–B2. Many of these tasks can be accomplished through good pedagogy that effectively uses Twitter in FSL classes.

Initial overview of Twitter

Twitter is one microblogging platform that enables users to post messages limited to 140 characters. Communication and community are the key tenets of the interactions among individuals who send out messages using the @ symbol followed by a user's name or the # symbol followed by a specific topic (see Figure 1).

FIGURE 1

Examples of tweets with @ and # symbols and shortened URLs on a user's main page

Proficient users retweet (RT) and modify tweets (MT) as they forward pertinent information to their followers. Links to websites, pictures, and videos can be part of any message. Users often find related online services to help in the organization of their social media posts or to shorten URL links as they aim to remain in the limited 140-character count.

Purpose

The author recognizes the importance of remaining relevant and engaging as students are becoming noticeably disengaged and unmotivated in traditional FSL learning environments. Students are bringing their personal digital devices to FSL classes where they are observed playing games or interacting on social media sites.

Recent research has confirmed that an educational paradigm shift is occurring and that traditional modes of learning are no longer sufficient among todays' students. Eighty percent of students are bringing devices to school and using social media to create, collaborate, connect, and self-direct their learning (Richardson and Mancabelli, 2011; Bender and Waller, 2011). Students are no longer content with just consuming information from traditional paper textbooks, a common practice of previous FSL teaching generations. Engaging activities that involve digital technologies for connecting and collaborating are needed for students who are keen to digitally create material for sharing their learning. As witnessed in the following tweets, students express their creativity as they write about their favorite candies (see Figure 2).
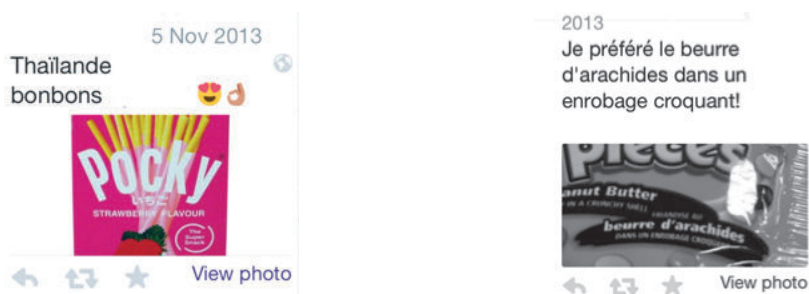

FIGURE 2

Examples of students' creative FSL tweets

In this context, where students are connecting on social media, there is a realization that language teachers need to find ways to use these tools to remain current in education. Bender and Waller state that "students spend nearly unimaginable amounts of time in the digital, social environments of Facebook, Twitter, and many other social networks, and this desire for virtually unlimited social interaction can and should be harnessed as a powerful educational force" (p. 11).

Regardless of the varying levels of language proficiency, Twitter provides enjoyable and educational tasks for all. This article will illustrate B1 and B2 level tweet tasks. C1 and C2 level suggested tasks are listed at the end in addition to "getting started" links and French hashtags for educators wanting to try Twitter.

Conceptualizing Twitter practices

To conceptualize tweeting as a practice is to understand that it is a platform comprised of both traditional and new literacies. It is a social practice that

allows students to participate in many language learning skills (reading, writing, listening, viewing, and representing). In addition, students adopt new digital and multi-modal skills when they are involved in hyperlinking to photos, videos, and websites. The participation in these activities now goes beyond learning just digital or computer skills. Included is the "new ethos stuff", a milieu of "interactivity, participation, collaboration, and the distribution and dispersal of expertise and intelligence" (Lankshear and Knobel, 2011, p. 76). Participants take part in online communities where they interact in affinity spaces and build a collective knowledge (p. 68). A sense of belonging occurs within an affinity group where interested members interact based on similar activities and preferences.

Theory behind the practice

Vygotsky's social constructivist theory proposes that learning is a social process. Educational technologies are providing limitless ways to set up this social process by allowing students to connect. The premise that learning results from social constructivism, originally Vygotsky's idea, has profoundly influenced educational pedagogy. Being a polyglot (plurilingual speaker) himself, Vygotsky recognized the importance of connection for the purpose of learning languages. Social constructivist theory underpins the use of Twitter where language and culture study can be supported by collaboration and the interaction with others, giving and receiving input and feedback (Vygotsky, 1978). Language learning is most successful when students are in environments where they receive assistance from others. Vygotsky proposed a concept referred to as the "zone of proximal development" which reveals a developmental continuum between what a student can do independently, representing his or her actual levels of development, and what a student can do with assistance from others, representing the proximal level of development (Vygotsky). In addition, connections made with Twitter have the potential to form communities in which members are able to learn language, culture, and ways of being and thinking from one another. Moll (2014) notes that Vygotsky's theory is gaining relevance around the world where diversity in classrooms is the norm and where second language learning or plurilingualism is beneficial to all.

Theory into practice

This section will review examples of how Twitter was used in a FSL classroom and the apparent affordances while leveraging this tool. Before implementation began, the teacher had considered her current situation and her students' dispositions. Students were actively involved on social media sites while at the same time needing to attain the language proficiency levels for their grade. As a result, two inquiry questions emerged:

1. How can the use of microblogging (e.g. Twitter) allow students to meet the CEFR B1 and B2 proficiency levels?

2. How can Twitter offer affordances to advanced language learners?

At that point, the teacher reviewed the CEFR language proficiency assessment rubric and CASLT's suggested tasks. With a clear vision of the end goal, the teacher implemented B1 and B2 tweet tasks and the students willingly participated.

Meeting CEFR B1/B2 levels via microblogging

One of the performance standards at the B1.1 level in the CEFR document is to have students be able "to follow the story line in simple stories" (CASLT, n.d., p. 25). In order to accomplish this task, the Core 11/12 FSL class read and wrote a story with a group of advanced level immersion students in eastern Canada. Having the students participate in the creation of a story on Twitter involved students having to read French immersion levels of writing, reinforcing language structures being learned. For instance, the immersion class often used the *imparfait* verb tense naturally, aiding the senior FSL students' learning. According to the researchers, Gao, Luo, and Zhang (2012), microblogging has great potential for promoting language learning by providing opportunities for learners to practice the target language in authentic environments with native speakers and by "help[ing] learners develop communicative and cultural competences" (p. 789). While students communicated with near native speakers, they were able to look for markers of time and recognize key vocabulary and structures specific to setting, characters, conflict and denouement. They also had a chance to use context clues to infer meaning.

Observable immediate benefits included increased engagement and motivation. The teacher commented that the students were enthusiastic about reading and writing. The students were excited to participate in a story that they chose to start off as "*L'extraterrestre . . .*". For a full week, students read one another's tweeted additions to the story and contributed their own. The students were on task. Students were coming to class and saying, "Cool, we get to tweet today" and "I wonder what's happening now in the story". The students were observed talking about the daily tweets while they tried to figure out the meaning of each one. Peer-editing took place before students posted their tweets. These discussions often broke out into laughter as students tried to compose a humorous additional line to the story. It was a fun week and even the teacher was compelled to laugh a few times at the comic twists and turns of *L'extraterrestre*.

A meaningful unexpected extension occurred when students were observed becoming tweet-pals. On their own volition, students asked questions to each

other. In the following tweet one student asked, "If you could invite someone famous to dinner, who would it be?" (see Figure 3).

Si tu peux inviter quel qu'un fameux(se) à dîner qui serait-il/elle?

FIGURE 3

A tweet-pal question

Such an activity replaces the traditional pen and paper pen-pal exchanges that used to occur in language classrooms. Instead, students were able to become pals on Twitter and the excitement around waiting to see how a pal responds to certain posts and questions was witnessed.

Other performance standards at the B1.1 and B2 levels in the CEFR document have students being able to "ask for or give simple information" (CASLT, n.d., p. 31) and being able "to understand long and technical instructions" (p. 65). To meet these outcomes, the class organized a *Dîner en Blanc* with another school. Students needed to find a French recipe, prepare, present, and then share it at a luncheon where only French would be spoken. Students used Twitter to ask for specific French recipes such as chocolate desserts to which others responded (see Figure 4). In response, one person on Twitter sent a link to a very useful French website that provided 254 recipes (see Figure 5).

From this hyperlinked website (Figure 5), students found various recipes to make. This task not only involved writing and reading, but it also involved spoken production and interaction. Students needed to be able to write tweets to find information, comprehend the information that was posted back to them and then follow instructions to prepare the authentic dish. On the day of the *Dîner en Blanc*, they had to present in French a summary of the recipe to the class. Spoken interaction then occurred in French during the luncheon.

Observations surrounding this event included: students interacting with language and culture beyond the classroom and being aware of the writing conventions required for specific audiences. The access to knowledge was easy. There was authentic action-oriented communication. Within this learning platform, students were willing to take risks by searching for information in a participatory and multi-modal environment. In the local community many parents and other educational stakeholders acknowledged the students' work on Twitter, thanked the teacher for "keeping the learning relevant", and even asked to participate themselves in the Twitter conversations. The teacher noted though that is was a challenge to keep the students' dispositions positive when random users on Twitter sometimes critiqued the students' French and offered better ways of writing certain expressions.

#edchat
#langchat Je voudrais un
dessert avec beaucoup du
chocolat s'il vous plait.

FIGURE 4

Extract from student tweets being posted

Choisissez votre région

Cliquez sur une région pour voir toutes ses recettes.

Recettes Rhône Alpes

FIGURE 5

A link posted for students to a website for French recipes

How does Twitter offer affordances to advanced language learners?

1. It meets many prescribed learning outcomes. Twitter lends itself to fulfilling the reading, writing, listening, viewing and presenting, outcomes for Core French in the British Columbia Integrated Resource Package (IRP).

2. It is engaging and motivating. Tweeting helps to "mak[e] connections with peers around shared interests, which contribute[s] to high levels of student engagement" (Greenhow and Gleeson, 2012, p. 468). It makes

language learning fun. The students are excited to read and reply to others' tweets in French.

3. It allows for interaction with the language and culture beyond the classroom. Students have a chance to connect with Francophones from around the world. This allows them to see language use in different geographical locations and to compare and contrast different French cultures.

4. It provides immediate feedback from teacher and peers. Writing development occurs with the immediate feedback the teachers are able to give as they watch the tweets. In addition, peers are watching as responses go onto the Twitter stream and they call out helpful hints. For instance, in one of the examples in Figure 2, where a student was writing about the candy he prefers and wrote "*Je préféré*" instead of *Je préfère*, the class was able to offer the correct spelling.

5. It develops and maintains relationships and community. Twitter helped the class to develop relationships with others through conversations and offered interactions with various communities. Twitter may facilitate "increased student-to-student or student-instructor interactions potentially leading to stronger positive relationships that improve learning" (Greenhow and Gleason, p. 470). Students are able to stay involved with class discussions even when they are absent. Following is a student's post to the class hashtag about her adventures while away practising for the National First Nations' volleyball tryouts (see Figure 6).

Dec 3
Aventure aujourd'hui: pratiquer le volleyball de versions d'essai indigènes autochtones nationaux

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FIGURE 6

An absentee's tweet entry to the class hashtag

The sense of community that results is tied to the social aspect of Twitter. Twitter can also be used as a platform for communities to empower their own language if they feel dominated by the presence of another language or culture. For example, Twitter allows for small pockets of French speakers who are living among a predominately English community or for speakers of indigenous languages to create communities on Twitter in order to enliven their own voices. At the same school where students were witnessing the successes of using a hashtag for the 11/12 Core French class, the Kwak'wala teacher set up a hashtag for her in-

digenous language course as it was seen as a way to revitalize the language.

6. It sets up an ethos of authentic communication that encourages risk-taking. Twitter provides an authentic means to communicate in the second language, steering away from dated and contrived dialogues sometimes used in language classrooms. It leads "to the design of richer experiential or authentic learning experiences" (Greenhow and Gleason, p. 470). A social and emotional presence results when students feel that they can connect to a real person in a community of language learners. Second language learning takes courage. Students have to be comfortable with making mistakes and risk-taking. Twitter offers "lower barriers to publishing and a more 'relaxed' writing style, which can encourage self-expression, creativity, playfulness, and risk-taking" (p. 473).

7. It aids in the development of new literacies. "When learners and educators engage in social and technical practices on microblogging sites such as Twitter, they may simultaneously be developing the kinds of new literacies increasingly advocated in the educational reform literature" (Coiro et al., cited in Greenhow and Gleason, 2012, p. 467). In the language classroom, teachers are able to go beyond the print-based literacies and extend into the multimodal digital realm. Twitter attends to students' orientation toward participative, multimodal, distributed, and co-constructed activities.

8. It gets students talking about what they are reading and writing. Students learn better when they are discussing what they are reading and writing. Twitter is a strong contemporary example of a dialogic linguistic activity because of the communicative practices that have developed around it (Gillen and Merchant, 2012, p. 48). Learning is occurring as the students actively discuss their tweets.

Suggestions for tweet tasks at CEFR *C1 and C2 proficiency levels*

In this section, Twitter uses at advanced levels will be outlined. As witnessed with B1–B2 language proficiency levels, Twitter is an effective tool in meeting various CEFR learning outcomes. Because there are not yet any specific Tweet tasks outlined for advanced language learners at C1 and C2 levels, a list of tasks is included here:

- practice difficult vocabulary by sending out a word and asking for definitions
- participate in a backchannel discussion alongside a reading or oral discussion in class

- reach out to native speakers and experts such as chefs or authors
- tweet a specific point of view or as a character in a novel
- find and interact with tweet-pals worldwide
- write a summary as a part of content literacy
- take Twitter quizzes
- share resources
- inquire about specific materials
- provide links to video clips or songs and then ask questions
- follow hashtags or people supporting advanced language levels (see Appendix A)
- record *des virelangues*
- set up #CEFRC1Fr and CEFRC2Fr hashtags on Twitter

By creating a hashtag such as #CEFRC1Fr, a purpose is built into this stream which could lead to a community of learners that interact and operate at that specific language proficiency level. Contributors to this stream would be practicing language at a bilingual level. It could be a place, conducive to advanced language learning, where recommended resources, contacts, and guidance are given.

Conclusions and opportunities for further inquiry

As a result of using Twitter in a FSL class during the past year, the participating teacher and students became more connected to others, resulting in more collaboration. From the observations made, the teacher was encouraged and inspired to continue using Twitter. Finding ways to integrate tweeting at B1–C2 levels may benefit students involved in advanced French language learning.

Published research on the use of Twitter in language classrooms is minimal and therefore more research is needed that examines Tweet practices in language learning at high schools and universities. It would be beneficial to add spoken production and interaction as an extension to the reading and writing tasks leveraged on Twitter. Perhaps students could record themselves and then upload the link to Twitter so that others could listen to the content. Furthermore, future work could include studying the impact on student language learning by comparing two cohorts of students working on similar tasks, one using Twitter in the ways described and one using other means.

Recommendations

In Canada, CASLT has designed learning tasks to fulfill CEFR A1–B2 proficiency levels in French. However, work needs to be done to design curriculum

tasks at C1 and C2 proficiency levels. Research aligning advanced level tweet tasks to specific literacies is required. An expansion to the list of relevant hashtags for advanced language learners (see Appendix A) is essential for educators wanting to connect with others.

Of course, privacy, security, and safety are of utmost importance. It is recommended that an online ethics discussion with participating students take place. When choosing names to use on Twitter, it is advisable that each student adopts a name that is used for educational purposes only, keeping personal and professional tweets separate.

Finally, for educators who are just beginning to use Twitter, there are many helpful resources available. Valuable "how to get started" links are provided in this article (see Appendix B). Once a Twitter account has been set up for teachers and students, an agreed upon hashtag is useful for the purpose of organizing tweets on a content management site such as Hootsuite or Tweetdeck.

With the proliferation of social learning online, language teachers' identities as professionals are attenuated by their refusal to adapt to the changing world of education. Therefore, it is critical for language educators, through professional development and their own impetus, to assimilate such online tools with good pedagogy, so students reap the affordances of using social media platforms such as Twitter. Language education at advanced levels stands to benefit from experimenting with digital social tools one click at a time.

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Appendix A

Useful hashtags for advanced language learners

#frimm
#frenchimm
#fle
#claved
#bilingual
#tv5monde

Some people and organizations to follow for advanced language learners

@legeekcestchicfr
@cinemavancouver
@lenouvelobs
@rue89weekend
@RC_ML
@irfe_shs
@ChantalGuy
@joseelegault
@gsimusique
@RadioCanadaInfo
@TFOCanada
@LP_LaPresse

Appendix B

Links to help you get started with Twitter

http://drsaraheaton.wordpress.com/2012/01/15/twitter-for-teachers-a-basic-guide/

http://www.teachthought.com/social-media/4-simple-ways-to-get-started-teaching-with-twitter/

http://www.gcflearning.org/twitter101

http://edudemic.com/2012/04/how-to-use-twitter-for-teaching-and-learning/

http://mashable.com/2013/09/18/hootsuite-beginners-guide/

http://www.scoop.it/t/twitter-in-schools