

## **Microblogging and language learning and teaching (LLT): another step to classroom 3.0?**

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Exciting new technologies mushroom every year and often enter our classrooms. As educationists, it is important to follow these trends (critically!) – especially if they are popular with young people – and to reflect on how they can potentially be applied to our teaching contexts and contribute to computer-mediated communication for language learning and teaching. According to social and educational technologist Josie Fraser: “*If you want young people to be equipped to meet the needs of any modern kind of workforce requirements, it’s impossible to not teach them (the skills). They need to have a set of key skills that they can use web-based technologies to reinforce*” (quoted in the *Times Education Supplement* (TES hereafter), April 2009).

Some years ago, there was blogging and many practitioners and researchers have included this technology in LLT to create collaborative environments (writing with several ‘voices’), to foster autonomy and learning strategies and to facilitate tutoring, independent learning and class work (Lamy & Hampel, 2006). Yet, with the birth of other so-called Web 3.0 technologies which are more interactive and quick (a very important notion in our hypermobile worlds), blogging might soon be a relic of the past... Microblogging appears to be one of these 3.0 technologies that are swiftly gaining a lot of importance and either skillfully complementing blogs or substituting them. The technology started to appear in 2006 and was soon “absorbed” by social networking websites such as Facebook, MySpace or LinkedIn. In microblogging, one can post short messages similar to SMS (up to 140 characters) as well as photos or sound clips from a computer, a mobile phone (for free if one can access a WLAN system) or a mobile device (mini-computers) and are usually limited to a few sentences or snippets of information (which make them look like “haikus”). The messages and micromedia can either be seen/read by anyone on the Internet or have restricted access status to selected individuals. People use microblogging to keep their acquaintances, colleagues, friends, families... posted about what they are doing or sharing their opinions, experiences... with basically anyone.

One of the most popular microblogging site is Twitter, which was launched in 2006 and had around 1 million users at the time of writing (April 2009). Other “mini-blogging” sites include: Plurk and Jaiku (cf. an exhaustive list of sites at <http://www.thws.cn/articles/twitter-clones.html>). In February 2009, Twitter had more than 7 million visitors, among whom many *tweachers* and *twudents* (teachers and students using the technology) worldwide who got into the habit of sending and receiving “Tweets” (i.e. messages in Twitterspeak). In order to start a Twitter account, one needs to register ([www.twitter.com](http://www.twitter.com)). Twitter allows you to find the contacts included in your e-mail account(s) to invite them to join and follow you on Twitter. Twitter also allows you to block people, should you not wish them to follow you on Twitter. Once the account is created, Tweeting can start. In this article, I will review some of the uses of microblogging in LLT through the example of Twitter.com. Though it may seem

superficial to separate language skills into writing, reading, listening and speaking, my contribution will look at the possible applications of Twitter for each of these categories for the sake of clarity.

### **Can we really use Twitter in LLT?**

First of all and according to Meabh Ritchie, in the April 2009 TES article mentioned earlier, Microblogging can have the following pros for education: it could help develop fluency in written (writing and reading) and oral skills (speaking and listening); students could learn how to focus on what they say better (they can only use 140 characters); through tweeting themselves, teachers can differentiate and help to reinforce what they have introduced in their classrooms; finally, microblogging can lead to more interactive and swift discussions. Also let's not forget that microblogging can add to metacognitive work, i.e. reflexive learning.

Twitter can be used between teachers and students, students and students in the same class, students and students in another country; as a tool for the entire class or for pair/group work. Work on Twitter can take place in the classroom or outside (home computer, mobile devices...). Through Twitter, all these actors are able to share and look for information, be (co-)creative and socialize in foreign languages in asynchronous (like on a forum) or synchronous ways (like chatting). Tweets can also be used to ask questions and hunt for instant points of view. For teachers, Twitter can allow them to boost task-based learning (Dervin, 2009), interactivity and collaborative learning which encourage the students to "achieve common learning goals by working together rather than with the teacher" (Macaro, 1997). Thus the teacher can play the role of a facilitator and guide rather than the "know-it-all supervisor". The renewed contacts between the students and the teacher through Twitter can also boost their respective trust and lead to increased motivation and trigger a more informal level of conversation (which is not always "negative").

So what can be done with Twitter? The following ideas are divided into two categories: outside (set as homework) or inside the classroom. Let us start outside the classroom:

#### *Reading*

- Follow the "life" of somebody the students know abroad or not and write a report on what they learnt about the person (one very good example is British actor Stephen Fry's Twitter which is updated daily at <http://twitter.com/stephenfry> - his Twitter is very interesting especially when he travels abroad; cf. also *Twitchhiker* at <http://www.twitchhiker.com/> who travelled the world moneyless and counted on Tweeters to help him);
- Read a book that has been tweeted (e.g. Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliette* at <http://twitter.com/romeo>);
- Tweet a book they are reading and/or co-create a story ("continue the story");

#### *Writing*

- Brainstorm on a theme, a grammar lesson... to prepare for the next lesson or during a certain period of time;
- Hold a learning diary (language and intercultural learning) to be shared with others and discussed in class or online;
- Chat with classmates or students from other schools/countries about their daily lives, opinions or whatever topic is being covered in class and discuss the results in class;
- Translate tweets into another language on one's Twitter;

#### *Listening*

- Listen to Boos (<http://audioboo.fm/> i.e. a short audio message) over a certain period of time and write a summary of each entry;

#### *Speaking*

- When travelling abroad or staying abroad, students can regularly post oral tweets telling their classmates and teachers what they are doing, what they have seen, spoken about, etc.;

During lessons:

#### *Reading*

- The 'silent lesson': nobody is allowed to interact orally for 20 minutes and all the interaction between the teacher and students take place in written form on Twitter;

#### *Writing*

- The students are asked to leave one Tweet-question each before the beginning of or during a lesson, to which the teacher answers orally;
- Write summaries based on reading or listening activities in concise manners (140 characters are allowed per tweet to compress a story);
- Write, rehearse and send an audio "Boo" (cf. supra);
- Organize opinion polls (through inserting a *Tweetpoll* at : <http://twtpoll.com/>);
- Make a "to-do" list;

#### *Listening*

- Ask the class computer to Text-to-Speech (TTS) or play back tweets in a spoken voice for the class teacher - students comment on what they hear or repeat (this function is available on most computers);

#### *Speaking*

- Live-tweet, e.g. while listening to a teacher, students live tweet what they heard to students in another country ("Twitterpals") or simply to help other students who need support ("Peer support");
- Translate/interpret in one's own language "live" (the teacher writes sentences in the foreign language and the students propose a translation).

Finally, in terms of interculturality, and if teachers want to move beyond the idea of "grammars of cultures", which merely present Others as Different Others, and push

forward a real intercultural approach, Twitter can be useful for students to notice that regardless of where people are from, their daily activities (though they may have different forms) tend to be alike. This is very important as we tend to concentrate on differences rather than similarities.

All in all, the possibilities offered by microblogging sites such as Twitter are uncountable and we are only seeing the tip of the iceberg. On top of the activities supra, teachers can use Twitter for differentiating (students rarely work at the same pace; quiet students may prefer to write than speak), reinforcing learning, etc. Before starting using Twitter in the classroom or as a means of setting homework, teachers should negotiate a *Twittiquette* (i.e. an etiquette; do's and don'ts in Twitter) with the students. Besides, it is important for tweachers to be aware of the following shortcomings to prevent them: potential cyberbullying (students sending nasty messages to each other), signs of cyberhatred, loss of privacy (students should not reveal anything too personal such or their tweets shouldn't be made available to everyone), blending in of private and public spaces, students can get easily distracted if there is no control in the classroom (surfing to any place on the Internet is very easy)...

### **A productivity tool for LLT?**

In a post on the *Web Worker Daily* in February 2009, Aliza Sherman asked the following question about Twitter: “[is it a] Productivity Tool or Time Waster?” (<http://webworkerdaily.com/2009/02/09/twitter-productivity-tool-or-time-waster/>). By getting to know the tool and its effects on a LLT “classroom 3.0”, weighting the pros and cons, language teachers will be able to judge this tool.

The following links will provide the reader with more information on what Twitter is and on how to use it. They can be used with students:

- A basic video presentation on Twitter: <http://www.digmo.co.uk/edu/twitter-in-education/>
- A user guide to Twitter: <http://twitteroid.com/blog/wp-content/files/MasteringTwitter.2009-c.pdf>
- The Ultimate Guide for Everything Twitter : <http://www.webdesignerdepot.com/2009/03/the-ultimate-guide-for-everything-twitter/>
- How to use Twitter in Language Learning and Teaching: <http://twitter4teachers.pbworks.com/Foreign-Language-Teachers>
- Learning Technology Consultant Nik Peachey's introduction to microblogging site Plurk and English as a Foreign Language: <http://nikpeachey.blogspot.com/2008/07/microblogging-for-efl-with-plurk.html>

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