

Student Directed Twitter Usage in Japanese University EFL Courses

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When I first started using Twitter for my University EFL classes in Japan several years ago, I would ask students in each class who among them was already using the platform. Typically, one or two people would raise their hands. Most would not even know what Twitter was, possibly due to the English pronunciation I imposed upon this microblogging system, which at that time boasted about a million users in Tokyo alone. In contrast, at the start of my April 2012 classes a couple of years later, to my recollection not one student had not heard of Twitter, and I estimate that at least thirty percent of my hundreds of students in that year already had Twitter accounts. This made it much easier to get started with the platform in 2012. I did not need to offer any technical usage help whatsoever to students. Twitter had become easier to use, my students were more technically savvy, or both.

In a previous paper delving into the pedagogical potential of Twitter (2010), I explained how this system could be used for communicating class content, sending out small, timely pieces of information, encouraging collaboration and feedback, and developing concise writing. Once the user has adapted to the platform and keeps open access to it, Twitter proves to be faster, easier, more social, and more convenient than email as a communication tool for short bytes of information. Twitter can be a great medium for teachers to monitor parts of the learning process, and a fantastic tool through which classmates can connect to and learn from each other outside the classroom. In that paper I also outlined a large array of communicative activities that take advantage of the Twitter platform.

I was highly convinced of the benefits of using Twitter myself for class management from day one of using Twitter, but did not have a lot of time to experiment with the structured Twitter activities I had discovered that might benefit students. By 2012 I was interested in seeing if students, given this tool to play with outside of class with no real structured directives in how they should use it, would enjoy it and perceive it as a benefit to their language learning. With that in mind, for the 2012 academic year I purposefully used Twitter as a form of experimental self-directed language practice in addition to the course management and communication tool I had come to love.

Methodology

I instructed all students in all my classes at Tokyo Woman's Christian University (TWCU) at the beginning of the year that they were to use Twitter regularly, not only as a platform to keep up to date with the coursework and keep in contact with the teacher, but also as an English chatting system, wherein they could casually write to each other about anything they wished, so long as they stayed in English. I told them I would look at their Twitter accounts briefly at the end of each term, checking to see how well they had set up their profile and how much and how often they had tweeted. I told them I was not interested in the quality of their English, just the quantity of their "tweets" (posts or messages). I did not offer a specific number of tweets for which they should aim, as I had no clue at that stage as to what should be considered a "good" amount, and did not want to interfere with students' natural progression in communicating online.

At TWCU, I taught the same students for a full year, even though most of the courses were one-semester classes. This allowed students more time to get used to the platform. Using Survey Monkey, I created a questionnaire of ten questions, which I embedded on my Moodle website, and required that students complete it outside of

class time at the end of the year to get credit in their participation score, which usually accounted for 20% of their course grade. Twitter usage actually overall accounted for about 5% of their course grade, so it did not really affect their overall score a great deal. Due to the nature of the questions I asked, the survey reduced the amount of account checking I had to do at the end of the second term, as students had already answered for me a main question I needed to know to evaluate their work, which was how many times they tweeted.

Below are the questions asked in the survey. Multiple choice answers, sometimes extensive in number, were given for all questions except number 10, from which I hoped to get the most pertinent information for this small study. For many of the questions, students could choose more than one answer if applicable.

1. What course(s) are you using twitter for with Ms. Mork?
2. Please write your full name in English (family name last, please) AND student number:
3. How much did you customize and prepare your twitter account? Check all that apply.
4. Look at your Twitter account. How many times have you "tweeted" since April, 2012?
5. In what section below does your answer to the previous question fall?
6. How many times did you tweet in Japanese?
7. Which best describes your frequency of tweeting?
8. What kinds of topics did you tweet about? Check all that apply.
9. Did you enjoy using Twitter?
10. In what ways to you feel twitter was useful (or NOT useful) to your English studies? Please be thoughtful - take your time and write in English. Don't worry about your grammar or spelling.

Questions two and three from the survey were included to help me grade students, so the survey was not anonymous. I believe this made it less likely that students would provide answers that were inconsistent with the truth, as they hopefully inferred that I would be checking. It also resulted in a fairly decent survey completion rate, although I did think more would have done it.

Results and Analysis

A total of 197 surveys were successfully completed out of a possible 229 students who could have taken the questionnaire. This indicates that 86% of students took the survey, but several students were taking more than one of my classes, so the percentage is slightly inflated. Of the 229 students, there were ten classes. 92 students were in three basic, compulsory freshman communications skills classes (1.2% of these students were also taking the freshman writing course), 19 were in a sophomore presentation class, 42 were in two Career English courses (advanced courses for motivated 3rd and 4th year students), and a total of 76 students were fairly evenly divided into freshman, sophomore, and junior writing classes. The breakdown of users in each class that took the survey varied from 7.1% (freshman writing) to 12.7% (one of the freshman communication skills classes).

Regarding questions addressing how much and how often Twitter was used, at first sight I was disappointed with the results, as they were on the lower end of the

spectrum I had provided in the survey. However, I did go into this project not knowing how much students would and could actually tweet. I predicted that the low figures would be a result of the influence of the large number of compulsory freshman English class takers. Over 43% (86 out of 197) of survey responses came from such students, who I predicted might not be necessarily motivated to improve their skills and may overall also possess lower writing skills, particularly compared with older students in more advanced and specialized classes.

Interestingly, through cross section analyses using the survey software's filters, I found that the survey results were generally not hugely affected (differences less than 2%) by age, level or class subject; very similar graph numbers and patterns emerged for all of the factors assessed through the survey. The overall number of tweets for the whole academic year was less than 30 for almost 60% of all classes, with students confessing to highly irregular tweeting patterns or mostly tweeting only a few times a month. I created a filter on Survey Monkey omitting all first year students, and found that the percentage of those tweeting less than 30 times in the year was actually a little over 60%, so my prediction that compulsory English course takers would use the Twitter platform less frequently was not supported. The only difference was that there seemed to be marginally less infrequent Twitter use patterns in the group containing no first year students. Almost 21% of survey takers reported tweeting between 31 and 60 times over the year, and the remaining 20% of students were spread fairly evenly between categories representing between 61 and over 180 tweets.

All students were required to set up their account and profile in detail, but the percentage of students who successfully met all the requirements of this part of their assignment was never more than 28%, except for the request to follow their teacher. 95% of all students who answered the survey did this. Less than 52% changed their Twitter theme, just over 80% changed their profile picture, 41% put in links to other websites they had, 32% followed people outside of class who were of interest to them, and only a little over 60% followed *all* of their other classmates. Students were required not to ever use Japanese on their accounts, and 92% of students obeyed this directive all of the time, and 5% of students only tweeted a handful of times in Japanese.

Students were given a completely free range of topics about which to tweet; they were not even given any topic suggestions. Although I could not predict all of the subject matter that would come up in students' tweets, I tried to create as many categories from which students could select (and they could check as many as applied) in the survey. An overwhelming 94% claimed to talk about what they did, 77% indicated they tweeted about how they felt, and 73% wrote about where they went. I listed these options first, and correctly predicted they would be the most common types of tweets. Over 35% indicated that they used the platform to communicate with other students, about 20% used it to talk about class work, 16% used it to share photos and miscellaneous non-school-related content, and almost 15% used it to interact directly with the teacher. Between 3% and 12% checked the remaining categories: gossip, following celebrities, following friends outside class, and following strangers. Five students wrote uses in the "other" section, but they all turned out to be part of the "what I did" category.

Results of the enjoyment factor were very positive. 77% of all students surveyed reported to having really enjoyed it. Half of this group was already using the platform before it was adopted for class. The other half reported they would continue to use Twitter in the future, although it is not known if their intention is to switch languages. Only 3% reported not having enjoyed the Twitter experience, and almost 17% confessed to liking it “sometimes.” Remaining students (less than 7% in each category) either enjoyed it most of the time, or generally enjoyed it, but had no plans to continue tweeting in the future.

The final section of the survey was the most important in that the question directly addressed what students thought about the platform with regard to its usefulness. Reflecting the low percentage of students who did not enjoy using Twitter were a small amount of negative comments (only eight in total), all shown below:

“I don't like twitter. I'm poor to tweet.”

“It was hard for me in English.” (4X)

“Actually, i do not have habit to check twitter always do it is not useful for me. of course, if i tried to do that but i could not do that. sorry.”

“Twitter was not useful for me... because I'm not good at using SNS even Japanese.”

“i think it's not useful to study english. but we can enjoy to learn english.”

Four more comments were neutral; they did not indicate if Twitter was useful or not. They mostly indicated that they did not use it enough to properly evaluate it. Of all the comments given in the survey, 95% of them contained a positive assessment of Twitter. Eighteen of these comments were not really useful to the study as the students who wrote them did not elaborate why or how they felt the system was useful. The most reflective feedback came from 23 students whose commentary was mixed, as indicated in the unedited examples below:

“I think it is useful that you can study casual English. And also you can follow some artists you like and learn from them without being bored. I don't like solve some English questions to study, but I can continue twitter because it's very simple and I can read even in a train. What I feel it's not useful is that sometimes there is no grammar and it doesn't make sense in the sentences because it's too simple and short. If you want to learn casual English in a long sentence, twitter is not suitable, I think. So twitter is useful, but it can't be a main tool to study English.”

“When I was using twitter, I followed some English speaking people, and could know how people use English, more than before. I thought it was not useful, when I found that I didn't know how to explain my feelings, however, that's my weakness in English that I can't say something in this language and it shows that I need to learn more English.”

“I enjoy twitter and useful to my English studies! Because,twitter is short sentence.I think it is easy to use, and I became to want to use more English. But,I couldn't use it everyday. Because,I didn't get the havit. And I couldn't follow out of class. Because I wrote personal date. So,I'm afraid. But,I like twitter! I enjoy it! I think to continue using it after the class finished!”

“First of all, it's useful because it gives us the opportunity to write English sentences easily. We don't need to care about our grammar so much. In addition to that, it's useful because we can practice the daily English. However, sometimes it's not useful because we have to write within the limited words.”

“I think it was very useful. I could write anything in English on twitter so it was very helpful to improve my English writing skill. Because talking in English with only Japanese classmates makes me feel doubtful about my English skill. However, I am sure using twitter is very useful to improve English communication and writing skill of students.”

“Twitter is so good communication's tool. Everyone is easy to check and tweet freely, so we can make good communication and increase our vocabulary. But, I am slug or I don't check my twitter frequently so I can't enjoy it so much.”

“I don't think twitter was useful to my English studies because I don't use twitter regularly.” (4X) “But I can communicate with foreign friends in English by twitter, so I'll use it after the course finishes.” (2X)

“I can use English in my life. But I already had have a Twitter account, so it's troublesome for me to change accounts.” (6X)

The remaining comments given by students were 100% positive and I have summarized the students' reasons below.

I could express my feelings frankly.

I learned/used colloquial expressions, slang, idioms, and abbreviations.

I could easily get to know classmates.

I enjoyed following my friends.

I could easily communicate with the teacher.

I could be reminded of homework easily.

It was fun.

I could easily share pictures and video with classmates.

It was a fast way to communicate.

I did not have to worry so much about grammar and spelling.

It was a good opportunity to use English outside the classroom.

I could tweet with native speakers.

I could follow my idols.

I checked my spelling etc. more often because I didn't want to look foolish.

I lost my hesitation to write in English.

I could read in English and not get bored.

I could read news in English.

Both the mixed and positive comments above all demonstrate that many students were clear on the advantages and future potential of using and continuing to use Twitter for their English studies. Ideally, I would have likely to have seen students using Twitter more for classwork, taking advantage of many potential language learning opportunities. However, I told myself at the beginning of the year that I would be happy if they simply tweeted in English, about anything. Therefore, even if students did tweet mostly about what they ate, who they ate it with, where they ate it,

how they ate it, and how they felt about what they ate, they were still tweeting in English. Moreover, regardless of the content of their tweets, students reported that they saw the value in it.

Students did not tweet as often as I had hoped. Despite this, the overall results of the survey were extremely encouraging. Can it therefore be assumed that even a small amount of activity on the platform is helpful to their learning? I fear that many students may have been assessing not so much the usefulness of Twitter as a tool to directly improve their language skills, but rather the platform's ability to engage them and help them connect to each other in ways they did or could not in the classroom. Nonetheless, even if this is the case, increased engagement, activity, interaction, and participation as a result of using the Twitter platform in an academic setting has already been empirically proven. A study by Dr. Rey Junco et al. at Lock Haven University says that these increases lead to improved critical thinking, improved psychosocial adjustment (maturity), and better retention of information (2010). The participants in their experimental group of their study actually produced significantly higher grade point averages than the control group.

Implications

Since the results of the survey indicated that using Twitter was both enjoyable and perceived to be of value to students, it is my intention to continue using this platform for self-directed learning outside the classroom as well as a tool for class management. Due to my lack of faith in the results of the investigation, however, mostly due to the lack of volume of activity on the platform, I plan to follow through with another survey for my current 2013 classes at TWCU. I intend to tweak the survey questions and add to them where needed, and more importantly, I will a) give a specific number of tweets students are required to aim for should they desire a high grade, and b) offer and continue to offer suggestions in classes throughout the year for Twitter usage that could potentially affect their language acquisition rate and intensity. I hope the results of a follow-up survey will strengthen the results of the one presented here and offer more credibility to student responses, which I predict will be similar.

This study focused only on students' perceptions and did not aim to empirically assess whether or not any part of their language skills actually improved. A much more ambitious project for the future, emulating that of Professor Junco, would be to design and undertake an investigation that would take a look at just that.

As Twitter has gained popularity over recent years, the number of languages in which it operates has increased to include Japanese, and there has been an ever increasing proliferation of third party Twitter add-on software, making the platform even more accessible and useful to Japanese users. Over the last year I have witnessed obvious increased Twitter awareness, increased smart phone ownership (more than 90% of my students own one), and seemingly more willingness among even luddite learners to embrace this platform (and others). Students in Japan apparently love their mobile devices, so it makes sense that they would be less adverse to putting good pedagogical use to applications and tools with which they are already familiar.

Works Consulted

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The logo for the International Association for Faculty Development (iafor) is centered on the page. It consists of the lowercase letters "iafor" in a light blue, sans-serif font. The text is enclosed within a circular graphic composed of two overlapping, semi-transparent arcs. The upper arc is a light red color, and the lower arc is a light blue color, matching the text. The arcs are thick and have a slightly irregular, hand-drawn appearance.

