Twitter in the EFL Classroom:
an Action Research Project

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Abstract

This paper describes an action research project conducted at Toyo Gakuen University between April 2011 and July 2012. Twitter was introduced to three classes. Survey and interview data were used to discern students' attitudes toward Twitter. Also, the frequency of use was calculated. Preliminary findings show that while students state a positive attitude toward Twitter, they are not yet willing to use it consistently and frequently.

Introduction

In order to learn a language we need opportunities to use it. Krashen (1981. p. 1) states that language acquisition, "...requires meaningful interaction in the target language—natural communication—in which speakers are concerned not with the form of their utterances but with the messages they are conveying and understanding." For English language learners in Japan opportunities for face-to-face meaningful communication in English may be few and far between. However, these opportunities exist on the Internet.

In April 2011, Professor Mari Yamauchi of Chiba University of Commerce and I began a three-year study funded by the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science called Developing Practice Models for ICT-Integrated EFL Instruction Centred on Production and Exchange. The study seeks to discover what challenges teachers face when attempting to integrate Information and Communications Technology (ICT) into EFL courses, and how these challenges can be overcome. The study also seeks to come up with an effective instructional model for ICT integration. One of the most interesting findings of the study thus far is that students selected Twitter as the most popular tool for communication exchange activities. (Stout and Yamauchi, 2011).

Based on the popularity of Twitter, I decided to trial Twitter in classes at Toyo Gakuen University. This paper will describe how Twitter was used in the classes and how the students responded to Twitter as an English language learning tool.

The teaching and learning context

All of the classes involved in this action research project were writing classes. During the first cycle, Twitter was used in one first year compulsory writing class consisting of 18 students. For the second cycle, Twitter was used in another first year compulsory writing class consisting of 15 students, and a third year elective writing class consisting of 24 students. The third year class had some fourth year students enrolled in it as well. The first year English classes are streamed using an in-house test. Nevertheless, there was a range of proficiencies in these classes. The English language learning proficiency of the first year students ranged from A2 to B1 of the Common European Framework of Reference. The third and fourth year students exhibited a wider range from A1 to B1. However, more of the students in the third year elective class were within the A1-A2 range. All the classes were held once a week in a Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) Room for a period of ninety minutes. However, I also taught a compulsory speaking course to the first year students, so I taught them a total of 180 minutes per week.

Independent study is an important part of the first year English curriculum. All first year students are required to engage in independent learning through a variety of activities including participating in conversations or receiving study support from a native English-speaking teacher in the English Lounge. The English Lounge is a conversation space and self-access learning centre. Students are also required to do extensive reading, online vocabulary study, and online pronunciation and listening practice. A stamp card is issued to all the first year students, and students receive a stamp after completing the proscribed independent learning activities. For the 2011-2012 academic year, the stamp card was worth 20% of the students' grades in the first year compulsory speaking classes. For more on the stamp card programme at Toyo Gakuen University see Talandis Jr., et al (2011), and Taylor, et al (2012).

While the stamp card programme has been successful and students are now engaging in independent study more than before, only the English Lounge activities facilitated meaningful communication in English. Furthermore, these activities were mostly limited to lunch periods. This meant that students who were unable or unwilling to spend their lunch period in the English Lounge had little or no opportunity to use English for communication. The students needed another means to practice using English. For this reason, and its popularity, Twitter was introduced into these classes.

A brief overview of Twitter

Twitter is an online social networking service (SNS) and microblogging platform launched in 2006. The system limits users to messages of no more than 140 characters. This forces users

to be concise. Since these messages, known as "tweets", are short, users can blog about things that are happening in real time. Users can subscribe to other users' tweets. This is known as "following". Tweets are public by default, but users can also send direct messages (DMs) that are seen only by their followers. Tweets may consist of text, and links to websites. Users can also share photos. Tweets can be sent via desktop computers and mobile phones. Along with posting messages, and sharing interesting websites and photos, users can also "retweet" (RT) messages from one of their followers. Tweets can be grouped by including "hashtags", which are words or phrases that are preceded by a "#" sign. Tweets can be made conversational by attaching the "@" sign to a user name. According to a Pear Analytics study of tweets originating in the United States in English, 37.55% were conversational (Kelly, R., ed. 12 August 2009).

In 2008, Twitter created a Japanese interface for Twitter users here, and since 2009, Twitter has been available to most mobile phone users in Japan (Mork, C-M., 2009, p. 42), and according to Yarrow, J. (6 January 2012) Twitter is the biggest SNS in Japan. The popularity, accessibility and conversational nature of Twitter make it an appealing tool for creating opportunities for meaningful communication in English for Japanese learners. As of 2012, there have been few studies of the effectiveness of using Twitter in English language learning. Borau, K., Ullrich, C., Feng, J., Shen, R. (2009), which claims to be the first such study, found that Twitter was effective in creating a sense of community among the participants, and was effective in teaching communicative and cultural competence.

The Research Question

Will my students use Twitter to engage in more meaningful communication in English outside the classroom?

Methodology

First cycle: April 2011 - March 2012

In the Spring of 2011, I introduced Twitter to a first year university compulsory writing class consisting of 18 students. I showed the students how to create a Twitter account in class. Following this, I encouraged them to tweet, but tweets were neither assessed nor rewarded. In addition, I created a Twitter list and posted it as a widget on my teacher blog (http://mrstoutsblog.blogspot.jp/), so that the students could easily see their classmates' tweets and respond to them. I gave the students time to use Twitter in class occasionally. However, Twitter was treated mostly as a supplementary and optional learning task. During the summer break, almost half the students continued tweeting in English, despite the fact that they were on holiday. However, interaction was limited—mostly single tweets with no response, although there was some student-

to-student, and student-to-teacher interaction. In September, the students were asked to complete a survey on their use of ICT, including Twitter. Thirteen students took the survey. Over all, the students were moderately interested in communicating in English online. On a six-point scale, six indicating most interest and 1 indicating least interest, student responses averaged 4.73. The majority of students reported accessing Twitter using a mobile phone. Five students reported accessing Twitter from both a computer and a mobile phone. Four students reported accessing Twitter on a mobile phone only, and another four students reported accessing it on a computer only. In October, the students were shown the number of tweets they had posted in relation to their classmates, in order to motivate them to tweet more. Between May and October the students posted a total of 756 tweets, with an average of 42 tweets per student. On average, each student posted 7 tweets per month, or about twice a week. At the end of the academic year the students were surveyed again. Sixty percent of the students said that they would like to use Twitter for productive practice of English and as a means of interacting with classmates and others. The vast majority also said that they wanted to interact with native speakers of English. This implementation of Twitter was a modest success. In fact, some of the students continued to tweet after the academic year was over. Based on the experience gained from using Twitter with this class, Twitter was introduced to two new classes in the following academic year.

Second Cycle: April 2012 - July 2012

In the spring of 2012 I introduced Twitter to another first-year compulsory writing class consisting of 20 students. The students were approximately the same level as the 2011 class. In May the students were given a survey regarding their use of ICT, including Twitter. Slightly more than half of the students (10/19) said that they were willing to communicate in English online with their classmates. Also, more than half of the students (10/19) said they were familiar with using a computer to do social networking. However, like the earlier class, the majority (73%) used a mobile phone for social networking. A number of changes were made to the Twitter part of the syllabus. Twitter was made obligatory by incorporating it into the university's stamp card system. While some students in the 2011 academic year were fairly active tweeters, I thought that students could tweet more if given the motivation. Since the stamp card system was successful in encouraging students to use English outside of the classroom, I felt that Twitter should be added to the stamp card. Students were required to get 5 stamps for using Twitter. Ten tweets earned them 1 stamp. Therefore, Twitter was effectively 5% of the course grade. I gave some class time to tweets periodically. I thought that students could benefit from some direct instruction on how to use Twitter. Therefore, I also showed students how to post links, and retweet. Furthermore, I told the students how to follow students in the previous class, and to

mention some students in that class in a tweet, as a means of starting a Twitter conversation. Once again, I added a Twitter list widget to the teacher blog for this class, so the students could easily see their classmates' tweets. Despite Twitter being compulsory, only three students managed to get all 5 stamps. The overall average was 22 tweets. This class averaged only 5.54 tweets per month, or just over one tweet a week. At the end of the school year the students were asked to complete another survey. After three months of using Twitter and other web-based communication tools the students were only moderately interested in online communication in English. On a six-point scale, six indicating most interest and one indicating least interest, student responses averaged 4.22, lower than the 2011 class. The students' satisfaction with Twitter was also moderate（4.05）. When asked an open-ended question about Twitter, nine students' comments were positive（eg. "楽しかった" Enjoyable）, five were negative（eg. "ツィッターは嫌いです" I hate Twitter）, and one was neutral. Two students gave no response and one student's response was incomprehensible. Despite their rather tepid feelings toward Twitter, an overwhelming 83% said that they would prefer to use Twitter for productive online communication in English. Twitter is the lesser of the evils perhaps.

I also introduced Twitter to students in a 3rd year elective writing course. There were 24 students in the class. I showed the students how to create a Twitter account in class. Again, I added a Twitter list widget to the teacher blog. Also, Twitter was integrated into the first writing task, which was a self-introduction. Students were encouraged to tweet but tweets are neither assessed nor rewarded. Twitter was treated mostly as a supplementary and optional learning task. I decided to make Twitter optional because the stamp card programme didn't extend to the third and fourth year.

Some students had pre-existing Twitter accounts, which they used to post in Japanese. Students were given some time to use Twitter in class, and a Twitter task was assigned as homework once. Few of the students completed the homework assignment. Most students tweeted only once. Many did not tweet at all. The students were given a survey at the end of the year. Eighteen students completed the survey. A surprising 33% said that they would like to use Twitter as a means of practicing productive communication in English online. Fifty percent said they would prefer to use Facebook. Finally, these students expressed a strong interest in communicating online in English. The average response on a 6-point scale was 5.17. Attendance was a problem with this class. Fourth year students in Japan are expected to spend most of their time job hunting. Therefore, sometimes three quarters of the class was absent. This made it very difficult to create a sense of community, and without this sense of community there was little motivation to tweet.

At the end of the 2012 academic year, students who were in the 2011 first-year writing class

were asked to give an interview about ICT for English language learning. The interview was conducted in Japanese, and the students responses were translated by a professional translator. I conducted the interviews because no qualitative data had been gathered about these students' opinions of ICT, including Twitter. Nine of the students agreed to give an interview. Six of the students were now taking a special class called ALPS (Academic Language and Professional Skills). These students are required to use Twitter for this course. All but one of the students spoke positively about Twitter. Here are some examples of their comments:

> I tweet in English only on my twitter account made for the English class. I was able to learn English text abbreviations through Twitter, which enabled me to post messages using short sentences. I use Twitter more regularly than other online tools.

> I spend more time reading other people's tweets than I tweet myself. It was interesting to be able to catch a glimpse of people's daily lives in other countries. I like using it as I think posting comments in English is also good for improving my English.

> I find Twitter interesting as I can learn what other people are thinking or feeling. I use Twitter because I want to let out my opinions and feelings.

These students seem to be using Twitter more for reading than writing, but they seem to enjoy writing as well.

Discussion

Twitter was more successful with the 2011 group than the 2012 groups. There are a number of possible reasons for this. We need to consider more that one factor in the success or failure of a technology. We need to consider multiple factors within the social context (Bax. 2011). The students in the 2012 classes might be unwilling to use Twitter for educational purposes because they view it as a technology for personal purposes—similar to Stockwell 2008 (cited in MacLean and Elwood 2013). This might be something that I can explore during interviews with students in the 2012 class. Further, despite the similarity in age, gender, and English proficiency, the two first year classes were very different. Nearly half the 2011 class joined the special Academic Language and Professional Skills class in 2nd year. Almost all the students in this class have expressed a fondness for English. They all had moderately good study habits too. The 2012 first year writing class had no students that demonstrated a fondness for English. Many told me that they hated homework. They may have considered tweeting in English homework. It is possible

that many of them would not have tweeted at all if Twitter were not part of the course.

As for the 3rd year class, I think that the key factor was poor attendance. The students were not together enough to create a sense of community, and they were not with me enough to learn how to create a community of their own. Job-hunting really interfered with the course. Something that is very common in 3rd and 4th year classes in Japan.

While the frequency of use was disappointing, the data showed that some of the students participating in this study used Twitter as a means of authentic communication in English. Two students in the first trial had a Twitter conversation that occurred between 2 Aug and 24 Nov 2011 for 38 turns. I wanted to interview these two students and ask them specifically about this, but unfortunately both refused to be interviewed. Other shorter conversations occurred between students in this class too. I believe that these conversations occurred because the students in this class had very good relationships. They got along very well. This class had a sense of community. About half of them entered the Academic Language and Professional Skills (ALPS) class. They continued to use Twitter in that class, because it is required, and short conversations occur from time to time. I think two things facilitated the use of Twitter for authentic communication in this class—the sense of community, and intrinsic motivation for learning and using English. Observation of the students' interactions in and out of class shows the sense of community. Data from the interviews shows the motivation. For example, one student said, "The reason why I study English is simply because I like English." However, this use of English for authentic communication has not been sustained by these students, except for those in the ALPS class. In fact, some have stopped tweeting, and some now tweet mostly in Japanese. This leads me to believe that students need to become a part of a larger community in order for sustained use of Twitter for authentic communication in English to occur.

The first year writing class in the 2nd trial showed little evidence of any authentic communication in English occurring. The class atmosphere was less friendly, not a community, and the attitude toward English was not as positive. Twitter in this class was compulsory, I made it a part of the stamp card programme. Despite the fact that Twitter was required in this class, the average number of tweets was not significant.

This leads to the research questions for the next cycle:

- Should Twitter be an optional or compulsory activity in the EFL classroom? In the implementations described above there was not much difference between the frequency of use when Twitter was required and when it was optional.
- How can the teacher help the students join an online community? Perhaps it would be worthwhile making students aware of international celebrities who have Twitter accounts.
- Would direct instruction on the use of hash tags, and building a following help? Is this in fact

necessary?

- What can the teacher do to "normalise" the use of Twitter for students? —I am wondering if for some students their Twitter use was motivated by the "wow" factor, and petered out when the "wow" faded. Further, I suspect for many (especially the students in the 2nd trial) Twitter was viewed as homework, not authentic communication.

Conclusion

The data above shows that students have mixed feelings about Twitter. While on the one hand they say that they want to use Twitter for communicating in English, when given the opportunity they do not really take advantage of it. For some this may be because of anxiety caused by unfamiliarity with the tool. As Twitter becomes more normalized in Japan, this anxiety should decrease. More study needs to be done.

Acknowledgements

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