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Twitter Application to Chinese Language Learning: Lessons and Suggestions

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Abstract

Making a connection between the requirement of 140 characters and the need of intermediate-low learners of Chinese as a second language (CSL) to produce output in a less challenging environment, this action research engaged the college CSL students in tweeting practices. Based on the descriptive statistics of the students' tweeting behavior and the students' responses to the survey administered at the end of the semester, this article reflects and summarizes the lessons learned. The authors propose that structural designs in the form of projects or tasks should still be considered for social networking applications such as Twitter to be used as an educational tool. How to make better use of the social-networking aspect of Twitter and build a community of CSL learners and practitioners is also discussed.

Keywords: Twitter, Output, Chinese as a Second Language (CSL), Community of Learners

Introduction

Learning is a socio-cultural process requiring internal dialogue and motivated interaction with others (Vygotsky, 1978). It is not coincidental in the field of second language acquisition research that attention has been called to both nonlanguage influences such as motivation and personality and the communication processes surrounding interactions from input to output (Gass and Selinker, 2001). Language educators may endeavor to implement any strategies to work on any aspects of the second language acquisition process. In this article we report our experiment and lessons learned regarding the application of the social networking platform Twitter to enhance the output of intermediate-low learners of Chinese as a second language.

From traditional blogging to microblogging and Twitter

It is not always an easy task to make language output happen. Since the onset of Web 2.0 around the turn of the century, language educators have considered traditional blogging to be a valuable solution to the need of engaging learners in written output. Experimenting blogging in their Italian instruction, Levy and Kennedy (2010) pointed out that traditional blogging could be an extension of in-class instruction so that students may have the opportunity to do more writing and discussion that has not been accommodated in class. In addition, blogging could motivate students to write correct due to students' awareness of authorship (Soares, 2008). As Campbell (2003) commented, blogging is best for reading and writing classes.

Microblogging, with Twitter being a popular representative, phased in and drew language educators' attention when they started to realize that traditional blogging is more appropriate for learners of intermediate levels or above (Murray & Hourigan, 2008). Microblogging still maintains traditional blogging's value in fitting a situated and socio-cultural theoretical framework of language learning (Newgarden, 2009). Twitter, for instance, may allow immediate feedback and interactive conversation and thus foster a sense of community of learners (Chawinga, 2017; Stevens, 2008). Croxall (2010) more specifically referred to the effect of daily tweeting on the classroom experience as a result of students getting to know better each other's lives outside of class and thus enabling conversations to happen in class more easily than they otherwise would have.

Meanwhile, Twitter's affordances in providing opportunities to engage in meaningful language output in a concise way lead educators to two different perceptions of the ramifications of the requirement of 144 letters restrictions in each tweet. Some perceived that it may better meet the needs of intermediate-beginning learners because it may offer some of the same advantages as blogs without the same level of difficulty and anxiety (Scinicariello, 2009). Some others perceived its significances beyond low-level difficulty and anxiety. Namely, conciseness is not simplicity. For example, regarding Twitter's application in education, Juhary (2016) pointed to the challenge for the user to revise their thoughts before finally tweeting them out. The brief style of expression, therefore, also suggests a value as a revision tool to help students improve their reflective, critical judgment, and information selection skills (Ricoy and Feliz, 2016). Similarly in the literacy field, Purcell (2015) innovatively used Twitter to engage students of English Language Arts in reading and then writing book summaries. We may emphasize both values simultaneously, but it was based on the former perceived value that the author of this report did the experiment of Twitter application to a medium-low level college class of Chinese as a second language (CSL).

The experiment reported here does not mean a rigorous experimental design was implemented. This study is action research in nature. It is hoped that lessons can be learned not only for the authors' but also for all CSL educators' benefit. As Ricoy and Feliz (2016) reviewed, there are still no solid methodological models for the didactic use of the Web 2.0 tools in general and Twitter in particular, which makes it more important to share good practices based on specific initiatives or case studies. The literature review for this study using *Twitter* and *Chinese* as key words in the titles and/or the abstracts in several major education research databases such as Ebsco, Sage, and ProQuest also came no fruit so far as May 2017. Against this background, this study reports the major practices in this experiment, discusses lessons learned, and proposes possible directions in future practice and research.

Methods

The participants were 12 college students in a 300-level CSL class at a Mid-Western university. The first author was leading the Twitter project as Teaching Assistant (TA). The first three weeks were partially used for orientation and troubleshooting purposes; therefore the tweeting performance in the first three weeks was assessed altogether like one week. The orientation focused on explaining the rationale, installing and learning to use Google Pinyin as the main input method, installing and learning to use the online dictionary software Youdao with an emphasis on its convenient mouse-over function for definition, establishing a Twitter account, and setting up 'following' relationships among the instructor, TA, and the students.

There were two types of tweets required of the students. In Daily Tweets, the students were advised to write about anything in their life and study that did not violate commonly accepted safety and ethical standards. As the name suggests, the students were expected to tweet every day but should tweet at least twice every week. Weeks 1-3, 5, 7, 9, 11, and 13 were the major weeks when they did Daily Tweets although they could also do it in other weeks. Alternatively, Weeks 4, 6, 8, 10, 12, and 14 were Composition Tweets weeks when the students tweeted in response to the TA's prompt topic. An example topic is adapted below:

It's been observed that Chinese people like to save money in the bank and only use "yesterday's or the-day-before-yesterday's money" when necessary, and that American people like to use credit cards and loans – which is "tomorrow's" money – for a happy life now. What do you think of this comparison?

In addition to daily tweeting by himself in leadership, the TA also provided explicit or implicit feedback to the students through the functions of direct messages or reply. An example of explicit feedback would be, '连.....都....., 就别说,' directly pointing out the correct structure to use. The implicit version of the above feedback would be, '伟伦, 你们能不能不说广东话啊? 大部分同学连普通话的句子都读不懂, 就别说广东话了,' imbedding the target structure in the natural communication.

Technically, for the convenience of management and assessment, the students were required to use hashtags like '#CSLW1' and '#CSLW2' in their tweets in each week. Each original tweet earned the student 1 point. To encourage interaction, each reply to a classmate's tweet also earned 1 point. With the quality of the tweet also considered in terms of grammar and fluency, the student was assigned a weekly grade on a 5-point scale, with 1 being the lowest and 5 the highest. The overall performance in Twitter constituted 10% of the final score in this course.

A survey (see the Appendix) was administered to elicit the students' perceptions of their Twitter experience. The survey was composed of 5-point Likert scale questions, with 1 representing 'strongly disagree' and 5 representing 'strongly agree.' The results from this survey constitute the major source of data with which we reflect on this Twitter experiment. Descriptive statistics will be used to provide a general picture of the whole project and some of the tweets by students will also be used to illustrate some aspects of the project that we are concerned about as second language educators.

Results and Discussion

In this section we first present the descriptive statistics, and then focus on the students' responses to the survey questions. As the survey questions are directly related to what we care about as language educators, we will discuss the questions as we present the results.

Descriptive Statistics

As Table 1 indicates, the students produced about 29 tweets in average in a period of 11 weeks (Week 4 – Week 14), which suggests a bit more than two tweets per week per student. This production is not as ideal as we would have expected for daily practice, but it looks slightly better than a pattern we would expect, which is that students would tweet only at the rhythm of the course, two classes per week. In addition, by deducting the total number of the tweets in the whole class (347) from the total number of @s (392) in all the archived tweets, the result 45 roughly represents the number of replies between classmates, which is definitely short of what we would expect for a learning community. These abstract figures do not present an optimistic

picture of the Twitter experiment, and this result seems to be evidenced by the students' responses to the survey, the analysis of which is what we focus upon below.

Table 1
Total Number of Tweets Written by Each Student

<i>Total Tweets</i>	
Mean	28.9
Standard Error	2.9
Median	32
Mode	33
Standard Deviation	9.9
Skewness	-0.15
Minimum	10
Maximum	47
Sum	347
Count	12
Confidence Level (95.0%)	6.3

Analysis of the Survey

Table 2 presents the means of students' agreement responses to the survey questions designed to elicit their perceptions of the Twitter experiences. To save space, the sequential numbers of the questions, instead of the actual questions or short variable names, are used in the table. Such sequential numbers are also placed in the parentheses when related questions are discussed in this section for convenience of reference. To learn how a specific question is phrased, the reader is still referred to the appended survey.

Table 2
Means of Students Responses to the Survey Questions

Question	Q 1	Q 2	Q 3	Q 4	Q 5	Q 6	Q 7	Q 8	Q 9	Q 10
Mean	2.8	3.1	3.7	4.7	2.8	3.3	2.6	3.8	2.6	3.9
Question	Q 11	Q 12	Q 13	Q 14	Q 15	Q 16	Q 17	Q 18	Q 19	Q 20
Mean	3.6	2.9	3.2	2.4	3.8	1.8	1.4	3.3	3.1	1.8
Question	Q 21	Q 22	Q 23	Q 24	Q 25	Q 26	Q 27	Q 28	Q 29	Q 30
Mean	3.1	3.6	3.2	2.1	2.9	2.9	2.9	3.6	3.4	N/A

Note: Please see the Appendix for the specific focus of each question.

Not-So-Sweet Experience and Possible Reasons

Students' evaluation of their own general experience with the Twitter project (Q1) was best neutral, slightly leaning towards the negative (i.e., disagreement about the pleasantness) side.

This is to the researchers' initial surprise and discouragement. The students' responses to other questions as well as literature review may provide some clues to the question of why that was the case.

We first inquired into some external factors, i.e. those that might not be directly related to language learning experiences. Time-consumption should not be related because the students' perception was about neutral although it slightly leaned towards agreement to the statement that the Twitter project was time-consuming (Q2). Limited experience tweeting either in English (Q3) or in Chinese (Q4) seems to be consistent with the literature that American youths predominantly use Facebook rather than Twitter (Greenwood, Perrin, and Duggan, 2016; Newgarden, 2009); however, the student did not believe it necessary to receive more training about how to use Twitter (Q5). The students only felt a little initial difficulty in Tweeting in Chinese (Q6). Therefore difficulty or lack of experience tweeting in Chinese should also be excluded as a factor.

Our expectation for more language output through Twitter as a less challenging tool does not seem to have been fully met. Consistent with the descriptive statistics demonstrated in Table 1, the students did not form the habit of daily tweeting (Q7). The students did feel, however, that the Twitter component had given them more opportunities to write Chinese compared to previous courses without a Twitter component (Q8). But it is not clear whether this increased opportunity for output was due to the requirement itself or due to the low-challenge affordance of the Twitter technology.

Perhaps the students' neutral-negative experience with the Twitter project (Q1) can be related to their perceptions of the learning process and achievements. There was not an objective test or measure to assess students' growth in CSL proficiency, but in response to the survey question (Q9), the students did indicate that they did not feel the Twitter experience had helped them improve their Chinese proficiency. What upset them in the learning process could be that they often felt having nothing to tweet about (Q10), or that they felt restricted by their Chinese proficiency even when they had something to tweet about (Q11). Therefore there is the need to analyze their neutral-negative perceptions (Q1 and Q2) dialectically. Twitter was supposed to present less challenge for intermediate-low learners; the reality was that Tweeting in Chinese still presented some challenges. Vygotsky's theory of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), however, suggests that appropriate challenges can facilitate learning (Vygotsky, 1978). In addition, other facilitation may further help learners tackle challenges. For instance, the students perceived some technologies such as online dictionaries to be helpful (Q12). These students' responses to Questions 26-29, in which they would recommend Twitter application for Chinese learning, also make us believe Twitter application is still a worthy effort despite some challenges.

Lack of Interactions and the Traditional Mindset of Learning

Part of the rationale in using Twitter for this CSL class was its affordance in allowing interactions to happen. The students did not seem to have felt the potential benefit of the social networking aspect of Twitter when they slightly tend to agree that the requirement of following each other's tweets is unnecessary (Q13). They might have 'followed' their peers technically, but they seldom read the peers' tweets (Q15), not to mention actively responding to peers' tweets (Q16) or receiving responses (Q17); therefore, no wonder that the requirement of following peers' tweets did not make them feel more connected with fellow students learning Chinese (Q14). This situation could be the result of no forceful requirement for interactions between

peers. But on the other hand, if such a forceful requirement had been applied, whether the students' evaluation of the Twitter experiences as positive would still be doubtful.

The students seemed to have a traditional mindset of learning. Compared to their lack of interest in interactions among peers (Qs 13-17), the students slightly tended to expect more linguistic comments (i.e. explicit feedback) on their tweets from the instructor/TA through 'reply' or 'direct message' (Q18). Not as warm was their attitude towards receiving the instructor/TA's grammar-intended authentic responses (i.e. implicit feedback) (Q19). What is encouraging, however, is that the students did take the instructor/TA's feedback or responses seriously and read them when they received them (Q20), and that they could understand the linguistic intention of the instructor/TA (Q21).

Another evidence that may point to their traditional mindset of learning is their responses to Q22 in comparison to Q10. They often felt having nothing to tweet about (Q10); consequently when the instructor/TA provided them the topics for them to respond to, they felt saved (Q22). There seems to be much room for flexible strategies between fully-structured classroom language learning and freer learning situated in a larger social context. If students are only used to traditional classroom learning, they are more passive and will find it harder to adapt to a learning style that needs more self-regulation. It is then the instructor's task to design instructional activities to bridge the two situations if socio-cultural learning theories and the interactionist theory of second language acquisition are still the frameworks to be applied.

Students' Hope and Recommendation

Looking ahead, the students slightly tended to welcome the initiative to invite native speakers of Chinese to participate in the Twitter project (Q23). Inviting native speakers is both consistent with Vygotsky's ZPD concept and supported by empirical research, e.g. by Soares (2008), which provided evidence that the participants preferred to involve older, more mature and independent learners, both in terms of cognitive development and linguistics proficiency in the target language, in their blogging activity.

The projection of their future Twitter behavior after exiting the course did not look good. Although 2/3 of them gave the rating of 3-5, suggesting willingness to keep in touch (through Twitter) with the current peers, any other learners of Chinese, or anyone that tweets in Chinese (Q25), the mean is only 2.9, suggesting a division among them. Their responses to another question clearly pointed to the possibility of discontinuing tweeting in Chinese (Q24), which was confirmed as reality when the researchers revisited their Twitter accounts while this article was in writing.

Despite their personal feelings, the students tended to agree that Twitter should be recommended to intermediate-low CSL learners although not so for beginners (Q26, Q27, Q28). In a similar vein, they moderately agreed that the Twitter practice in this course be recommended to other Chinese instructors (Q29).

Conclusion: Lessons and Suggestions

The Twitter experiment in this research report was intended to make use of Twitter's affordances in conciseness and social networking so that the CSL students might engage in language output as well as interactions. Analyses of the descriptive statistics and mainly of the students' survey responses revealed that the experiment was not as successful as it had been

expected. A deeper analysis of the specific responses, however, also informs us that the Twitter application to CSL learning is somehow accepted and even recommended by the students. There is the need to summarize the lessons and experiences so that the instructional design can be improved to benefit future CSL educators and learners. In this section, albeit named *Conclusion*, we continue the discussion from the previous section but attempt to summarize and connect the discussion to some theoretical or pedagogical principles.

Structure should be an aspect for instructors to pay attention to. One of few bright points in the Twitter project in this study is the students' positive comment on the bi-weekly tweeting in response to given topics in comparison to their feeling of having nothing to tweet about in Daily Tweeting. In the previous section, we discussed that the students' traditional style of learning might have hindered them from more active learning in a freer context. Those language educators who still plan to have a better control of their Twitter project within their class could consider giving it a structure, e.g. providing a topic. By providing this structure, while solving the problem of no topics, the instructors are actually implementing in the Twitter environment the principles of task-based language teaching (Lai, Zhao, and Wang, 2011; Newgarden, 2009).

A structure can also be geared in a way to encourage interactions, an aspect that the Twitter project in this study did not do well. An enhanced version of the above structure could involve collaboration in small groups on some discussion topics. As Rankin (2010) found about her Twitter experiment in the history class, putting students into small groups of 3 to 5 and allowing them to discuss the material stimulated more ideas. For a language class, our purpose for the target language to be practiced is achieved as long as the students actively use that language as a tool of communication (Borau, Ullrich, Feng, and Shen, 2009).

To serve the purposes of topics and quality input of the target language, inviting native speakers should be considered (Online Colleges, 2010). Within Twitter, however, invitation may not be invitation but a matter of searching and following. As Chinese netizens have little access to foreign social networking applications such as Facebook and Twitter (Ding, 2016), and there are few people in America tweeting in Chinese, it may not be easy to find native speakers of Chinese to follow. Hence there is the need for CSL programs or associations to initiate and maintain a CSL Twitter network of native speaker instructors, TAs and learners of any levels. When the network is large enough, individual instructors or TAs will not be under much pressure in producing target language for learners to follow. Actually Australian educators' practice of building a community of learners in Twitter (@edutweetoz) may shed light on our exploration. Hosted on a rotational basis their twitter account allows educators from across the country to take the reins and share ideas about education (McDonough, 2014). If such communities of Chinese language speakers and learners become reality, then CSL students will be able to switch their mode of learning from passive responding to given topics to improvised action based on attunement to the language and sociocultural practices of the community (Newgarden, 2009).

When the above scenario is not available yet, however, another source of quality input to follow is the Twitter accounts of some major news agencies such as the New York Times, Voice of America, Reuters, and BBC. Following these Western media in Chinese may meet two needs for language learning. One is the need of input of native speaker quality, as the Chinese tweets from these media are tweeted by native speakers or highly proficient speakers. The other is the need of topics. In particular, Western media may cover both news related to China and those in the students' own society, and therefore the students may find it easier to have topics to tweet about in a meaningful way. Perhaps this is the best we can achieve for the learners in a context of

having restricted access to social networking platforms populated mostly by native speakers of Chineseⁱ.

Undoubtedly, managing a Twitter project for CSL needs instructors' commitment. Teachers should play an essential role as dynamisers in the formal incorporation of Twitter in the teaching process, as well as in enhancing interaction between the participants (Ricoy and Feliz, 2016). In addition, teachers need to demonstrate their commitment not only by using Twitter during the course, but afterward, to encourage students to continue to use it for their own ongoing learning and personal network development (Newgarden, 2009). To mobilize college students to form the habit of tweeting as part of education is not an easy task but not impossible (Ricoy and Feliz, 2016). Before and throughout the process, the instructors should make continual effort in creating and maintaining a teaching presence in the created community of learners (Wang, et. al., 2016).

Finally, flexibility and creativity needs to be emphasized. There is no single right way to teach with Twitter. About possible modes of integration, readers are referred to Sample (2010), who presented several dimensions of consideration. Specific to language education, however, the researcher suggest that instructors start from asking basic questions related to second language acquisition such as what are important for language leaning to happen? Then the question is, what affordances of Twitter may be used to facilitate those processes? The Aesop's fable story of the water crow managing to drink water by dropping pebbles into the bottle bears significance for educators interested in technology application (Zhao, 2003). Technology itself is not educational. We are the people to creatively turn the pebbles Twitter to tools that may facilitate language learning as we understand it.

This study is action research based on the researcher's reflection and student's responses to a survey designed to elicit their perceptions of the teaching design regarding the Twitter component. Therefore the findings from the study should be limited in terms of generalizability. But it is the researcher's hope that these reflections and suggestions may serve as a clearer, better structured, context for those instructors interested in designing better learning experiences for their CSL students. In the end, we present a student's tweet and hope that more CSL instructors may have happy smiles as we do whenever revisiting tweets like it.

昨天我忙忙的，可是今天写完中文作业以后我才能放松一点儿...我知道在大球有很多比我紧张的人，可是最近上课，打工，申请工作，手头很紧都让我很累，很紧张。不过我感激在生活中的好东西，比如我家，我的朋友，我的男朋友，我身体健康，什么的。

ⁱ **Note:** WeChat has to be mentioned since it is the most popular social application among Chinese all over the world. Research has emerged applying WeChat to language education, e.g. Wang, et. al. (2016) on tandem Chinese-English language activities between Chinese and Australian students, and Ding (2016), as well as Shi, Luo, and He (2017), on using WeChat in EFL teaching. Although anyone of any country can download and install WeChat, feasibility of applying WeChat to CSL teaching and learning remains to be explored.

Appendix

The Survey of Twitter Experience

Please fill out the survey about your experience learning Chinese using Twitter in this course. Your feedback is very important for future improvement. Thanks!

Please read each statement and put a number in the parentheses according to the following scale.

1. Strongly disagree. 2. Disagree. 3. Neither disagree nor agree. It doesn't matter. 4. Agree. 5. Strongly agree.

Background and General Experience

1. () Your general experience with the Twitter component in this course is pleasant.
2. () Generally speaking, the Twitter assignments are NOT very time-consuming.
3. () Before this course, you have never tweeted in English.
4. () Before this course, you have never tweeted in Chinese.
5. () There should have been more training on how to use Twitter for this course.
6. () At first, you felt tweeting in Chinese was difficult.
7. () As time goes by, you have felt it easier and have formed a habit to tweet every day.

Other Experiences with Twitter in This course

8. () The Twitter component in this course has given you more opportunities to write Chinese than in previous courses without this component.
9. () You feel that the opportunities to write Chinese provided by the Twitter component in this course has helped to improve your Chinese proficiency, either in spoken Chinese or in written Chinese.
10. () You often feel that you don't have anything to tweet about.
11. () Even though you have something to say and tweet, you often feel your Chinese is not proficient enough to express it.
12. () You have often used a translation software and felt not sure whether the Chinese sentence you produced was correct or not.
13. () The requirement of following each other's tweets is unnecessary.
14. () The requirement of following each other's tweets has made you more connected with fellow students learning Chinese.
15. () Despite the requirement of following others' tweets and the fact that you have tweeted everyday as required and included others in your list to follow, you have seldom read other people's tweets.
16. () You have actively responded to your classmates' tweets.

17. () You have received active responses from your classmates.
18. () You expect more linguistic comments on your tweets from the instructor/TA, either through “reply” or through “direct message”.
19. () You expect more meaningful responses to your tweets from the instructor/TA.
20. () You seldom read the instructor/TA’s replies to your tweets.
21. () When you read the instructor/TA’s replies, you can easily perceive his linguistic intention.
22. () You feel the biweekly composition on specific topics are more helpful than the weekly tweeting.
23. () You would look forward to it if the instructors had invited native speakers of Chinese to participate in the Twitter project.
24. () After finishing this course, you will continue tweeting in Chinese.
25. () When you continue tweeting in Chinese after this course, you would like to keep in touch (by following and being followed) with the current peers, any other learners of Chinese, or anyone that tweets in Chinese.
26. () You think students learning Chinese can tweet as early as CSL 101.
27. () You think instructors should require the CSL 102 student to tweet as you do.
28. () You definitely believe that CSL 201 students should use Twitter as you do.
29. () You would recommend the Twitter practice in this course to other Chinese instructors.
30. Other Comments:

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摘要

本行动研究将推特对 140 字符的要求和中初级中文二语学习者在宽松环境中进行语言输出的需求联系起来，把推特引入大学中文二语课堂。基于学生推特行为的描述性统计数据和学生对期末调查问卷的反馈，本文反思和总结了此次教学探索的经验教训。作者提出，把推特这样的社交应用用作教育工具，任务性学习或项目性学习方面的教学结构设计仍然是必要的。作者也探讨了如何利用推特的社交功能建设中文二语学习者和教育者的学习社区。

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