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Using Twitter to Promote Writing and Digital Literacies in the 21st Century Classroom



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Twitter is among the most popular social networking apps globally. As of 2020, there were approximately 330 million monthly active users and 145 million daily users. In Portugal, however, Twitter only represents approximately 5% of the total market share, being heavily dominated by Facebook. In my previous articles, I have advocated for WhatsApp, Tik Tok and Instagram as mediums to involve students and augment learning scenarios in and out of the classroom. This article will provide some input on how Twitter can be used as an effective tool to promote writing and learning skills as well as digital literacies.

"Tweeting is like sending out cool telegrams to your friends once a week." — @TomHanks

Introduction

Twitter is yet another social networking platform full of potential for ELT. On Twitter, "registered users may share brief messages called tweets, which fuel the social networking experience and promote a form of microblogging that may be extremely useful to enhance standard language skills such as writing, learning skills like critical thinking and a range of digital literacy skills (as in information, media, and technology literacy). Because Twitter is a multi-platform and multi-device platform that allows its use in a range of contexts. Sharing tweets, following your best friend, favourite singer, actor, or politician, a tweet (or a reply to a tweet) may be easily delivered through the Twitter app via smartphone, tablet, or a desktop browser. Given its user-friendly design and the fact that it is currently the most popular microblogging service in the world, Twitter may be used to supplement regular classroom activities since it offers continuous communication, generates alternate work, centres resources, and embeds information. Out of the box, Twitter also lets users share pictures, music, and video files allowing your students to continue their language learning experience well beyond the physical classroom.

Using Twitter in ELT

Espinoza-Celi and Pintado (2020) in their case study: Using Twitter to enhance writing skills with senior high school students suggests that young learners spend a considerable amount of time writing on social networks, promoting

a need to foster intelligible writing. Within a platform such as Twitter, learners may acquire new chunks of language, advanced vocabulary, discover idioms, and be confronted with important grammatical structures. Additionally, on Twitter, it is easy to read about and share habits, beliefs, and customs providing a new significant window to promote intercultural awareness and promote online citizenship.

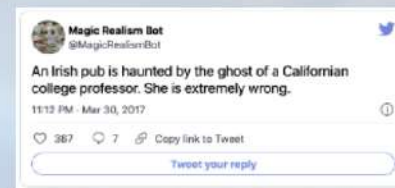
One of the characteristics of Twitter is that each tweet is restricted to 140 characters, which forces students to be very selective about what they want to share. Although a teacher might think that such a limit is not nearly enough to assess a learner's writing, the continuous use of Twitter (over a term or a semester) will provide a significant amount of input and allow one to mark their writing over time as opposed to a specific in-class task done once or twice throughout the school year. In fact, Twitter is a great platform to promote formative writing assessment which may be transformed into summative assessment when pre-arranged criteria are presented to the group. Additionally, having such a small window for writing requires users to show not only their originality but also intelligible writing skills to meet the criteria of microblogging. Educational tweeting is an excellent and natural method for students to learn new things about their peers and for teachers to learn about their students' ideas, making lesson planning more enjoyable, and effective, and studying more relevant, entertaining, and pleasant. Twitter also enables students to complete online writing tasks without the need for the teacher to specifically assign them weekly homework.

Each student's writing and ideas may easily be tracked through Twitter, allowing teachers to follow their students' development via a #hashtag and @tagging, enabling instructors to keep tabs on their pupils' grades. It allows students to practise using the language for situational communication, while simultaneously providing instructors with an opportunity to see their learners perform in a real-life situation, opposed to classic classroom tasks that often feel a bit artificial and not always meaningful. Furthermore, using Twitter in the classroom may make it easier for students to work together on collaborative writing assignments and generate new ideas and new content (Ahmed 2015). While being an excellent experience for language learners to practise the grammar and vocabulary covered throughout the school year, students can easily obtain feedback on their remarks and answers as well as write about what their peers have shared.

Twitter activities for ELT

As teachers, we are in a constant endeavour to provide the best tasks for our learners. Since the Internet contains an infinite supply of information, the teacher and students can quickly highlight a tweet containing relevant content using the class hashtag or by tagging the teacher. Nevertheless, what activities could be completed within ELT? The following 5 suggestions are only the tip of the iceberg.

1. First things first, teach learners how to tweet. The ESL Library offers a framework to teach and learn about tweeting. It is safer to provide an informed outline before moving towards the app: <https://esllibrary.com/courses/74/lessons/2053>
2. Post a discussion or debate questions related to the contents being covered in class and guide your students to post responses using the class hashtag.
3. Follow one of many Twitter bots dedicated to providing writing prompts. There are picture writing prompts such as @pictureprompts or standard writing prompts like @MagicalRealismBot or @UnlikelyPowers. Use their input to foster creative writing either in class or at home. The amount of work assigned to learners will heavily depend on teaching context and time restraints. Here are some examples:



4. Use Twitter's polling feature to post a question for your class (or classes) to vote. It can be very useful to get feedback before moving forward.
5. Ask learners to share links, videos, songs, articles, podcasts, experiences, and examples of the contents you are covering. You do not have to do all the work! Learners should actively participate and suggest contents you can later use in class for language teaching.

Also, there is a growing number of Twitter profiles on promoting ELT and general learning. Some are institutional accounts, but many others are accounts of English teachers who share relevant content and with whom you can even build bridges for projects.

Some concerns

Privacy issues are always a concern when using social media for educational purposes. It is very important to overview and present clear guidelines before using Twitter for writing tasks regardless if it is a short-term project or a yearlong activity.

Final thoughts

Twitter can easily be considered a valuable and versatile tool for general language learning since it engages students to write in English, share and follow contents that are relevant for them and for language acquisition. It presents an easy interface, the possibility to track students' preferred topics and performance and follow different users. In addition, Twitter offers a variety of topics in different fields that exposes students to vocabulary as well as essential grammar structures that allows bridges between what is covered in the classroom and the use of English in the real world. It can be incorporated in assessment guidelines and allow teachers to formatively assess their learners and truly transform how writing is promoted in your lessons. It might seem strange, but I am confident that the results will surprise you.

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