THE USE OF MICROBLOGGING IN LANGUAGE EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

This article takes into account the role of microblogging in language classes. The author will share her experience in class with microblogging platforms like Twitter, Plurk and others. The paper will not concentrate on the technological aspects of microblogging but on its educative importance as an extraordinary form of motivation for students in the process of apprehension. This article also proposes a series of practical applications in order to use microblogging in class.

INTRODUCTION

There is a new generation in this society of information technologies that seems willing to share its life and experiences at every opportunity, particularly in digital form. They share their photos on Flickr, their videos on YouTube, their music on Last.fm, their favourites and tags on del.icio.us, their lives and hobbies in their blogs, their moments on Twitter, they share and create knowledge on wikis and they elaborate and think about their aims and failures on e-portfolios. Everything is shared on these new social networks. Everything is open, everything is accessible, everything is interactive.

It is clear that we are living during an authentic technological revolution in which adaptations or revisions of what is known are useless. There is no transition whatsoever between what is traditional and what we are living in these days because what has emerged is completely different. The trend is unstoppable and there will be a need for new systems for processing all this information. The new technologies urge radical changes in society and for this reason also in education.

Education 2.0 must include among its priorities the teaching of strategies besides contents, where students must learn to manage aspects of their own language learning on their own. This is very important because studies will continue beyond students' academic lives as they become engaged in life long learning.

Nowadays, the concepts that new technologies bring to the new approach on education are not unknown: cooperative training, interactivity, responsibility and autonomy in learning, feedback, group skills or collective intelligence.

Therefore, it is in this context that the figure of the student 2.0 appears, which we teach to take responsibility for his own training and who finds the motivation for constructing his knowledge through interactivity with the digital world around him. He disposes of all information in every instant and can decide what, when and how to study what he is interested in. This gives the teacher the important role of guide in the teaching process.

As teachers we have to accept that teaching methods must drastically change and that we need

to use information technology for communication purposes. The technology that urges us to change also helps us find a new pathway through the use of its tools. And one of the tools that can help us are microblogging platforms.

MICROBLOGGING

A microblogging platform enables its users to send short text messages of about 140 to 200 characters or multimedia files like photos, videos or audio files to be published as posts in a blog. These updates usually have a rapid frequency and can be read by other users in a public form or, if preferred, reserved for a group of users in a private form.

Microblogging enables real time interaction among users through different technologies, mechanisms or ad hoc programs. Sending posts is very simple and they can be sent and received as SMS messages, emails, IM clients, RSS, desktop clients or through web pages. The use of these technologies gives access to microblogging services from mobile devices which is undoubtedly one of its best advantages.

The most well known platform is *Twitter* which was launched in July 2006. Its main competitors are *Plurk* and *Jaiku*. But there are many more like *identi.ca, Ping.fm,* or *Twingr*.

Recently, specific microblogging services have appeared for specific sectors like in the case of *Yammer*, focused on the business world, or *Edmodo*, a private microblogging service for students and teachers. Popular social networking sites like Facebook, MySpace, Linedln and Xing also have their own microblogging services, known as 'status updates'.

The best aspect of *Twitter* is the large amount of users. It was the first and day by day it has become the largest microblogging service in the world. The advantage of *Plurk* is that updates are shown on a

time line where they are chronologically ordered in a very visual way. The positive aspect of *Jaiku* is its lifestream that enables us to put together all information about what we are doing on line with other services like *Flickr*, *Last.fm* o *del.icio.us.*

On the whole, different tools with different specific characteristics. As teachers the use of one or the other will depend upon our necessities and aims. The one we use is not important. What is important is that we reach the real aim of microblogging: to create an online community of interactive and collaborative users all using the target language.

COMMUNITY

A lot has been written about the benefits of active training using strategies that attract students and move them away from the traditional approach, where they only had to listen and take notes.

I think it is fundamental to highlight the idea that the student be active and that he participates in his own training process both inside and outside the classroom. But in order to enable students to participate in an active way, it is necessary to create a feeling of belonging to a class or a group. This feeling of belonging helps cooperation and the will to work together. If students feel like members of a group and know their fellow students, the dynamics that emerge will be much more functional. A new community will be created which is much more than just a group of individuals that share an activity, whatever activity it may be.

Microblogging helps students (and teachers) to communicate both in class and globally, being able to communicate across outside the limitations of the classroom and with language learners in the real-world.

The way in which information is divided among microblogging services goes far beyond the

blogosphere. The information shared becomes more personal and because it is immediate, users feel they are more in community with each other, forming a real group.

The teacher, as guide of the group, will be responsible of creating activities that motivate communication among members of the community. These activities will have to help the student in his language training and learning process, so they will have to be designed according to the learning needs of our group.

SUGGESTIONS FOR ACTIVITIES

This section provides some examples of collaborative activities that can be carried out through microblogging in language classroom. In all these activities the students and the teacher share all information and maintain an exchange in real time outside the classroom:

- Headline: The students are given a newspaper article and they have to write a headline for it.
- Collaborative writing: All the students have to create a short story or fable, starting from the first post sent by the teacher.
- Secret person: The students have to guess the secret person sending questions to the teacher, to which he can answer only yes or no.
- Meeting point: A space where all students can discuss an issue decided by the teacher.
- I know what you did last week: The students are asked to send posts on what they are doing during the week (use of present continous tense). The following week, using Plurk's time line, the students will have to tell what their fellow students did the week before (use of past tense).

On the other hand, teachers can also use microblogging to get in touch with students. For example:

- Notice board: The teacher can send memos on tasks, exams or events.
- Resources: Recommend resources and share links, web pages, videos, etc.
- Answers: Teachers can solve student doubts or answers very quickly.
- Feedback: Collect students' opinions about the class.
- Motivate: Keep interest high helping students to give a sense and utility to what they have learnt.

CONCLUSIONS

Lastly, I wanted to share one of my experiences with microblogging in class.

I have the pleasure of working as a teacher in an institute where it is possible to carry out these kinds of activities. The teaching philosophy we apply is focused on communication and as I have already mentioned, not much is more communicative than microblogging.

An experience that confirms this is one that my students and I have been using for a couple of months. In order to finalize a series of activities on the works of a famous modern Spanish painter, the students write a series of questions on the board, that they would ask the painter if he were present.

This class had a user account with *Twitter*, so through *Twitter* we managed to contact the painter and the students could exchange questions and messages with him.

The result of this experience was so enthusiastic that at the end of the course, outside the classroom, the students continued to discuss, look for and share information found online on the works of this artist and on other similar issues. Obviously,

all commentaries were in Spanish, the target language of the lessons.

This is one of the most important advantages of the use of microblogging in class: the community continues to be active even after the class or the entire course has ended.

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