

13 Teachers as awakeners: a collaborative approach in language learning and social media

Alessia Plutino¹

Abstract

This paper provides an overview of the successful pedagogical project TwitTIAMO, now in its third year, where micro blogging (Twitter) has been used in Italian language teaching and learning to improve students' communicative language skills, accuracy, fluency and pronunciation outside timetabled lessons. It also explores the background and outcomes of two recent implementations to the project: (1) the implementation of a Twitter Champ, acting as a Knowledgeable Other (Vygotsky, 1978) and the development of her transferable employability skills; and (2) the use of a free speech-to-text tool to develop accuracy in pronunciation and writing. More broadly, the paper offers an overview of social media as a powerful tool to transpose classroom communities into online learning communities and enhance spontaneous and collaborative learning outside conventional classroom settings, based on Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) principles and current Personal Learning Environments (PLE) and Communities of Practice (CoP) theories.

Keywords: Twitter, collaborative learning, personal learning environment, communities of practice, CoP, PLE, employability.

1. University of Southampton, Southampton, United Kingdom; a.plutino@soton.ac.uk

How to cite this chapter: Plutino, A. (2017). Teachers as awakeners: a collaborative approach in language learning and social media.. In C. Alvarez-Mayo, A. Gallagher-Brett, & F. Michel (Eds), *Innovative language teaching and learning at university: enhancing employability* (pp. 115-125). Research-publishing.net. <https://doi.org/10.14705/rpnet.2017.innoconf2016.661>

1. Introduction

This paper aims to look at one important need for practitioners in today's educational landscape: to understand how we operate in social contexts and engage within our communities in order to make teaching purposeful (Wheeler, 2016).

The advent of Web 2.0 has enhanced students' participation, autonomy and independent learning by generating a collaborative approach based on users' willingness to create and share knowledge, information and user-generated resources within different types of communities.

'Community' becomes an integral part of Web 2.0: the "key idea in the learning-communities approach is to advance the collective knowledge of the community, and in that way to help individual students learn" (Bielaczyc & Collins, 1999, p. 19).

This is also supported by Vygotsky's (1978) social-constructivist theories, which suggest that people learn best through a process of knowledge-construction supported by the community and by Smith's idea that "[w]e learn from the company we keep" (Smith, 1988, in Bielaczyc & Collins, 1999, p. 19).

Vygotsky (1978) states that individuals can learn on their own only to a certain extent and it is with guidance from a More Knowledgeable Other (MKO) that each of us can learn more and achieve a higher potential.

These concepts have nowadays adapted to a wider range of people and situations and MKOs can now be identified with fellow students, colleagues and professional networks.

Besides, being physically present is not anymore the only way to act as an 'MKO': as learning evolves into a collaborative project where the focus is determined by the interest of participants, communities become CoP (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989; Lave & Wenger, 1991) i.e. "groups of people who

share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly” (Wenger, 1998, p. 1).

Membership to various CoPs enables students to create their own PLE and students use their networks and external resources to customise and expand their own learning.

After a brief overview of the project, I will explain how the theories cited above have contributed to the implementation of a ‘student MKO’ to facilitate and enhance language learning using social media (Twitter) and the development of some students’ activities.

2. Project overview

The TwitTIAMO project was launched in semester two of the academic year 2013/14 for the Italian ab-initio course at the University of Southampton; a fast paced course, achieving the CEFR B1 level in one year.

The project was a response to students’ course evaluation highlighting a gap in terms of Italian cultural awareness as well as tutor’s need to provide opportunities for students to improve their communicative language skills, accuracy, fluency and pronunciation outside timetabled lessons. A total of 35 students split in two groups took part in the pilot.

Twitter (a microblogging service with a maximum length of 140 characters per tweet) seemed capable of responding to the combined challenges raised by students and tutor and was therefore chosen for this project after an evaluation of various computer-mediated communication technologies available to students and accessible at any time of the day and from any device.

The fast paced nature of tweets, mimicking spoken language exchanges, seemed to be a good way to evaluate students’ communicative language development during out of classroom time.

A public twitter group, TwitTIAMO, was created for the course and administered by the tutor. Students set up their own individual account exclusively for language learning purposes and were asked to follow each other so they could interact outside of classroom time. Few rules were established so that students would get appropriate feedback from the tutor: comments in capital letters would provide correct versions of messages; the tutor would not necessarily reply to all students' tweets but would be selective and choose those which would be beneficial to the whole group. In doing so, the tutor would prompt students to use vocabulary and structures covered in class and facilitate metacognition (Appendix, [Figure 1](#)).

3. Outcomes of the pilot project

The pilot of TwitTIAMO was very popular amongst the 35 participating students. In May 2014, only a semester after its implementation, students nominated the project for an Innovative Teaching Award. The project came first at Faculty level and was highly commended at University level.

A chronological analysis of students' tweets and a cross reference of their written and speaking task performances matched and confirmed previous findings from [Ritchie \(2009\)](#):

- The limit of 140 characters focuses the attention, develops its own sort of discursive grammar set, requiring a great deal of summarising (even synthesising, on occasion).
- Students get a sense of what a person is like outside of the classroom and feel more comfortable with classroom discourse.
- Twitter is purposeful: curriculum-centered but not curriculum-bound.
- It changes classroom dynamics: teachers make themselves available and are connecting their students to the real world, fostering

communicative language practice/ research/ cultural full-immersion/ reflection, facilitating communities of users and collaborators.

4. Phase 2: new implementations

After a successful pilot scheme, the project was rolled over in 2015. Students demonstrated their enthusiasm about being part of a ‘community within a community’, i.e. a transposed out-of-hours classroom. For this reason, the second phase of the project focused on determining, firstly, whether Twitter could be used to:

- Enhance spontaneous and collaborative learning outside conventional classroom settings based on [Vygotsky’s \(1978\)](#) ZPD principles.
- Transpose classroom communities into online learning communities and develop PLEs and CoPs.

Secondly, whether Twitter would allow:

- The implementation of a model which would see a student Twitter Champ gaining and improving a set of specific transferable employability skills whilst liaising with the academic in charge and acting as a Knowledgeable Other for the students participating in the project.

Katie Churchill, (<https://pathbrite.com/MlleKC/profile>) was chosen as Twitter Champ for her previous enthusiastic participation on the TwitTIAMO project and her affiliation to the wider University multidisciplinary IChamp Network (<http://www.diglit.soton.ac.uk/>) which helps students develop employability skills by working with academics on digital literacy and cascading their expertise to staff and students. Katie, in teamwork with the tutor, facilitated learning activities by tweeting in Italian about culture and language, acting as a more knowledgeable presence within the Twitter course group.

She ran workshops on Twitter, created user resources, researched apps, solved technical issues, acted as a catalyst for students' engagement and participation and enhanced students' awareness about learning opportunities in social media, exposing them to new online CoP and PLEs.

Her most successful example in this respect was the creation of the Italian Twitter Masterchef challenge, involving students in evening cooking battles practising their Italian. Students were encouraged to become part of a growing community where situated learning was taking place via the process of 'legitimate peripheral participation' (Lave & Wenger, 1991) and belonging to specific CoP.

The second implementation of Phase 2 was more practical in order to determine students' perceptions on:

- Using Twitter for language learning.
- Using speech-to-text tools within Twitter (mobile phone app) as a language learning tool and determine its effectiveness to improve pronunciation and grammar awareness.

A speech-to-text tool allows a user to convert his dictated message into written text.

The Twitter Champ tried and tested various mobile phone speech-to-text tools, however, due to Android vs iOS accessibility issues, her final recommendation was to use the built-in microphone tool that comes with the Twitter app and set the language to Italian.

The aim was for students to 'dictate' tweets rather than write them in the traditional way (Appendix, Figure 2), especially when on the go.

The main pedagogical objective was to activate students' metacognitive skills when using this tool by making different attempts until the spelling on the tweet they were dictating would appear correct.

5. Conclusion

Although a full data analysis has yet to be completed, interim outcomes seem to confirm previous findings from [Ritchie \(2009\)](#) that microblogging's fast pace and word limit can positively impact on fluency and facilitate interactive discussions, also including reflective learning.

There is an initial indication from students' written and oral performances that those who actively engaged with facilitated activities on Twitter improved their language skills and cultural awareness. The participants' oral and written exchanges showed evidence of a high frequency – and manipulation – of idioms through the use of humour (Appendix, [Figure 3](#)). The way idioms contributed to communicative competence and intercultural awareness was also praised by the External Examiner who saw evidence of new and enriched vocabulary, which also confirmed that students had overcome the stumbling block in the acquisition of a foreign language ([Kovecses & Szabó, 1996](#), p. 327).

In terms of topics, although only at beginner level, students were eager and able to discuss controversial issues from various contexts that mattered to them (e.g. exam boycott, Appendix, [Figure 4](#)).

The analysis of the students' questionnaires confirmed that the presence of the Twitter Champ helped to facilitate spontaneous discussions and exposed students to 'new horizons' for language learning (Student 12).

The enthusiastic response received by the project is a testimony to the impact of online communities and the difference they can make in teaching by building time and space for communication, discussions and collaboration with others (inside and outside the classroom), to learn more widely ([Wheeler, 2016](#)).

In terms of employability skills, the Twitter Champ model established a mutual and productive collaboration between the tutor and the Twitter Champ student.

The latter had numerous opportunities to develop a variety of skills including teamwork, communication, public speaking, self-management, planning and organising. The practical insight into academic environment eventually led Katie to co-present papers at conferences and has undoubtedly been an asset in her successful application for a postgraduate certificate in education.

Finally, with regards to the use of the Twitter built-in dictation tool, the tutor felt this was slowing down the pace, immediacy and spontaneity of Twitter activities. Notwithstanding, 75% of participants found the use of a dictation tool definitely helpful to self-assess their own performances, identify flaws in pronunciation and accuracy, and plan collaborative courses of action, with either a peer or their tutor.

A recommendation can therefore be made to use dictation tools for some specific class or independent activities for those students who particularly need a special focus on self- assessing their accuracy and grammar skills.

References

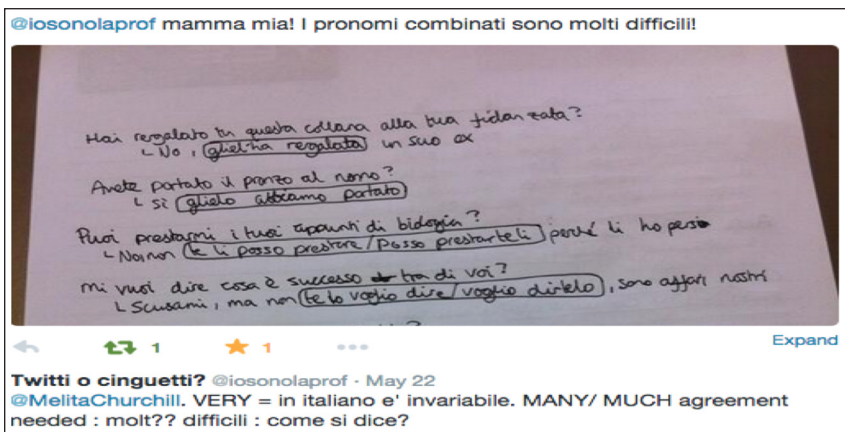
- Bielaczyc, K., & Collins, A. (1999). Learning communities in classrooms: a reconceptualization of educational practice. In C. M. Reigeluth (Ed.), *Instructional design theories and models: a new paradigm of instructional theory, Vol. II*. Mahwah NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Brown, J. S., Collins, A., & Duguid, P. (1989). Situated cognition and the culture of learning. *Educational researcher*, 18(1), 32-42. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X018001032>
- Kovecses, Z. & Szabó, P. (1996). Idioms: a view from cognitive semantics. *Applied linguistics*, 17(3), 326-355. <https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/17.3.326>
- Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511815355>
- Ritchie, M. (2009). *Chirping about Twitter*. Times Education Supplement, pp. 18-21.
- Smith, F. (1988). *Joining the literacy club*. Portsmouth NH: Heinemann.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: the development of higher psychological processes*. Harvard: Harvard University Press.

Wenger, E. (1998). *Community of practice: learning, meaning, and identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511803932>

Wheeler, S. (2016). #Learning social. *Learning with 'e's*. <http://www.steve-wheeler.co.uk/2016/05/learningis-social.html>

Appendix

Figure 1. Example of tutor's reply to help metacognitive reflection



Context

Student was completing a grammar exercise on combined pronouns and posted a picture of her notes.

Translation

Student's tweet: my goodness! Combined pronouns are very difficult!

Tutor's tweet: Very = in Italian it is invariable. MANY/MUCH agreement needed: molt? What is the Italian for this? (Tutor provides an explanation but not the answer).

Figure 2. Microphone option to ‘tweet’ on mobile Twitter app

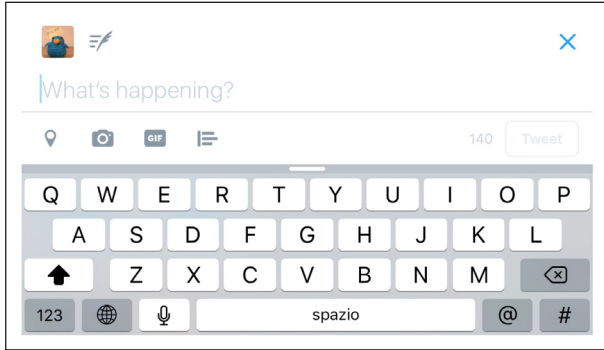


Figure 3. Example of own made up idiomatic expressions used with humour



Context

Student had been tweeting about what he cooked for dinner. Unfortunately he was missing an ingredient and had to find a substitute.

Translation

Student's tweet: It's no use crying over spilled milk.

Tutor's tweet: this is a nice expression; does it mean that now it is too late to change things and you can only eat salami instead of bacon?

Student's tweet: ah ah! Exactly! I prefer this one: if life gives you lemons, how about making some limoncello?

Figure 4. Student expressing concern about current affairs: exam boycott



Context

This tweet was posted during a time of academics' industrial action threatening to delay marking for the summer term, with negative consequences on students' graduations.

Translation

Student's tweet: Today I am worried about the marking boycott. I really want to be able to graduate!

Published by Research-publishing.net, not-for-profit association
Dublin, Ireland; Voillans, France, info@research-publishing.net

© 2017 by Editors (collective work)
© 2017 by Authors (individual work)

Innovative language teaching and learning at university: enhancing employability
Edited by Carmen Álvarez-Mayo, Angela Gallagher-Brett, and Franck Michel

Rights: This volume is published under the Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives International (CC BY-NC-ND) licence; **individual articles may have a different licence.** Under the CC BY-NC-ND licence, the volume is freely available online (<https://doi.org/10.14705/rpnet.2017.innoconf2016.9781908416506>) for anybody to read, download, copy, and redistribute provided that the author(s), editorial team, and publisher are properly cited. Commercial use and derivative works are, however, not permitted.

Disclaimer: Research-publishing.net does not take any responsibility for the content of the pages written by the authors of this book. The authors have recognised that the work described was not published before, or that it was not under consideration for publication elsewhere. While the information in this book are believed to be true and accurate on the date of its going to press, neither the editorial team, nor the publisher can accept any legal responsibility for any errors or omissions that may be made. The publisher makes no warranty, expressed or implied, with respect to the material contained herein. While Research-publishing.net is committed to publishing works of integrity, the words are the authors' alone.

Trademark notice: product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and explanation without intent to infringe.

Copyrighted material: every effort has been made by the editorial team to trace copyright holders and to obtain their permission for the use of copyrighted material in this book. In the event of errors or omissions, please notify the publisher of any corrections that will need to be incorporated in future editions of this book.

Typeset by Research-publishing.net
Cover design and cover photo by © Raphaël Savina (raphael@savina.net)

ISBN13: 978-1-908416-49-0 (Paperback - Print on demand, black and white)
Print on demand technology is a high-quality, innovative and ecological printing method; with which the book is never 'out of stock' or 'out of print'.

ISBN13: 978-1-908416-50-6 (Ebook, PDF, colour)
ISBN13: 978-1-908416-51-3 (Ebook, EPUB, colour)

Legal deposit, Ireland: The National Library of Ireland, The Library of Trinity College, The Library of the University of Limerick, The Library of Dublin City University, The Library of NUI Cork, The Library of NUI Maynooth, The Library of University College Dublin, The Library of NUI Galway.

Legal deposit, United Kingdom: The British Library.
British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data.
A cataloguing record for this book is available from the British Library.

Legal deposit, France: Bibliothèque Nationale de France - Dépôt légal: mai 2017.
