

9 Assessing language student interaction and engagement via Twitter

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Abstract

Twitter has over 326 million monthly active users with the number of daily users growing every year since 2016 and is increasingly used by students and academics to interact and build online learning communities. For distance language learners, Twitter offers an open, free, and accessible environment for interaction and engagement which is difficult to replicate in Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) forums. VLE forums have the issue of being module and year specific and are often split into small student groups limiting the opportunity for natural interaction between students. This study aims to build on existing research and assesses the levels of student interaction and engagement via Twitter. The research involved the use of a survey of language students at The Open University (OU), UK, and a virtual ethnographic analysis of tweets related to the term 'OU languages'. The survey asked OU language students about their use of Twitter in relation to their studies and their thoughts on its advantages. The analysis of public tweets related to the term OU languages showed that a large number of different users tweet about the topic, which leads to enhanced interaction between students themselves and their teachers. A sentiment analysis of the words used in the tweets also showed that the tweets are consistently positive, which can lead to increased motivation for students. Overall, the analysis showed that students value the use of Twitter by teachers to give out information and offer support as well as the support they offer and receive from each other during their studies.

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Keywords: social media, Twitter, virtual ethnography, interaction, support, engagement, learning communities.

1. Context of the project

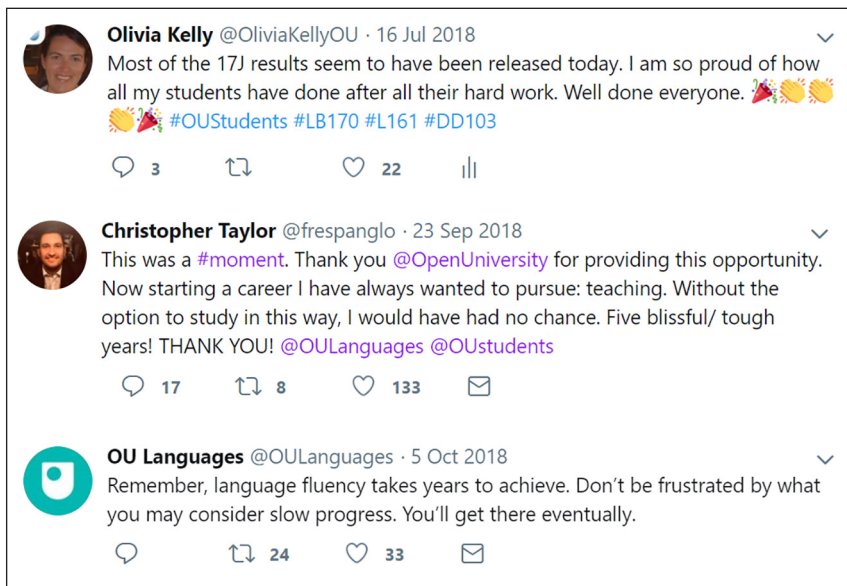
Use of social media is now widespread, with Twitter having 326 million monthly active users (Cooper, 2019), offering students and teachers open online collaboration in a changing socio-educational context. Hashtags allow learners worldwide to communicate their shared interests (examples include #langchat and #mfltwitterati), with enormous benefits to the education community for self-directed learning and empowering lifelong learners. Twitter offers authentic connections and access to the target language, particularly for distance learners, at no financial cost.

As a teacher, I communicate with students and fellow academics via my Twitter account (@OliviaKellyOU) to share course information and retweet interesting articles. I have gradually built up student followers and also become connected with other academics, often outside of my own higher education institution, the OU. The OU is a distance learning university based in the UK. It has the largest number of students in the country and offers a variety of language degrees (The Open University, 2019). Lecturers with the OU mostly work from home where we lack the opportunity to build academic contacts in the same way as campus-based lecturers. Twitter has provided the opportunity to build my own knowledge and contacts and allows home-based teachers and students to offer and receive support (see Figure 1 below). For example, #Twitterchats which involve a series of set questions being discussed via Twitter synchronously usually over a one-hour time slot, have been enlightening and I was privileged to run one via #LALTCHAT in May 2018 on the topic of using social media for academic debate (@UoL_LALT, 2018).

This chapter researches how Twitter promotes learner communication, including how students find Twitter beneficial in their language learning, in an open

environment where students are not restricted to particular courses or student groups and can communicate more widely. These findings can be useful to language teachers considering using Twitter in their teaching practice or to develop their use of social media further. It finishes with recommendations on how language teachers can use Twitter effectively as a language learning and community building resource for students.

Figure 1. Examples of supportive tweets



2. Intended outcomes

2.1. What problems can Twitter solve?

Social media allows distance learning students to interact with each other outside of their own institution's VLE. While chat forums are available, these are split between separate courses and only a few students make regular use of them,

perhaps since they require logging in to the institution's site. Social media is now widespread, particularly through mobile devices, allowing students to build relationships in an open environment with more control over their own Personal Learning Network (PLN). Teachers can use open environments in social media to interact with students and highlight suitable news articles, reminders of deadlines, or offer encouragement and support.

2.2. Existing research

Some research has already been carried out on how higher education institutions have incorporated social media into their teaching. [Hull and Dodd \(2017\)](#) showed that Twitter was particularly effective in “encouraging contact between students and faculty, promoting active learning, and respecting diverse talents and ways of learning” (p. 98). [Hattem and Lomicka \(2016\)](#) came to similar conclusions in their critical analysis of 17 language learning studies where Twitter was used in a variety of language settings and tasks. They found that Twitter had the potential to promote interaction and communication, and build community. There has been limited evaluation of the impact of this on students, but [Ricoy and Feliz \(2016\)](#) showed student participation increased as students made more use of Twitter and it became “a motivating experience” (p. 237). However, they recognised that this depends on the teachers’ “role as dynamisers in the formal incorporation of Twitter in the teaching process, as well as in enhancing interaction between the participants” ([Ricoy & Feliz, 2016](#), p. 237). Most existing research analyses tasks where Twitter participation contributed to assessment, so more research is required to assess how students are using Twitter informally outside of class requirements on a voluntary basis ([Rosell-Aguilar, 2018](#)).

3. Nuts and bolts

To build on existing research on how students use Twitter for language learning, two types of primary research were carried out. A survey of OU language students active on Twitter assessed if it helps with their learning and contributes towards building a learning community. The @OULanguages Twitter account

was set up in 2014 and is run by the languages department. It currently has over 3,600 followers and regularly tweets about language related topics. Using virtual ethnography (a research approach for studying social interactions in virtual environments) to assess how OU language students behave and interact in the digital environment of Twitter, a statistical analysis was carried out on tweets related to the term OU languages.

3.1. Tweet analysis

All the tweets over the period of one month from the 13th of September to the 12th of October 2018 which contained the term OU languages or tagged the @OULanguages account were extracted, returning a total of 198 tweets. These were subsequently recorded in Excel ([Appendix 1](#)) under the following headings.

Table 1. Data variables collected relating to tweets

Date	Twitter handle ²	Type of tweet	Words used in Tweet	Number of replies	Number of retweets	Number of likes
13/09 to 12/10	67 different Twitter handles	67 Original 129 replies	For frequency & sentiment analysis	Maximum: 17 Average: 0.69	Maximum: 24 Average: 0.97	Maximum: 136 Average: 4.57

3.1.1. General trends in tweets

Table 1 above shows the amount of interactions going on between students and academics using the term OU languages in their tweets. Within only one month's time frame, 67 different people were tweeting using this term. This shows the reach of Twitter and how it allows for open communication where anyone who joins the platform can get involved. Of the 198 tweets, 67 were original tweets, but these led on to 129 replies suggesting that Twitter can build conversation and interaction. The words used in the tweets will be analysed further in Sections 3.1.2 and 3.1.3.

2. Username unique to each Twitter user.

While the average numbers of replies and retweets were below one per tweet, the maximum figure shows that certain tweets can lead to a lot of student interaction, with one tweet getting 24 retweets and another tweet leading to 17 replies (see [Figure 1](#)). This shows that while some tweets lead to limited interaction, others can resonate with students and really help to enhance their learning and engagement with their course and the institution. The figures for likes are much higher, which is to be expected as ‘liking’ a tweet is used regularly by users of the platform to show agreement with or support for a tweet. In this case, the average number of likes per tweet reached nearly five with a maximum of 136, an extremely high amount considering the relatively low number of followers of @OULanguages. Overall, these figures support the argument that Twitter can be effective in promoting student interaction and engagement with each other and with teachers and the course team, as well as being open to a wide range of users.

3.1.2. High frequency words

All the words used in the 198 tweets were run through a counter to look for high frequency words. Any word which appeared five times or more is listed in [Appendix 1](#) with common small words such as ‘a’, ‘in’ or ‘it’ excluded. [Figure 2](#) below shows most of these words.

From a quick glance at the words shown above, it is clear that they focus on course and study related content. Even focussing only on the words used more than ten times in those 198 tweets shows the overall positive impression given in this social media context (see [Table 2](#) below).

Table 2. Words used more than ten times

Students	Languages	Thank	French	Will
Good	Course	Great	Just	Module
Luck	Enjoy	Now	Time	Year

Certain high frequency words were to be expected such as ‘student’ or ‘language’, but the regular use of support words such as ‘enjoy’, ‘luck’, and ‘thanks’ suggests

that students and teachers use Twitter not only to provide information but to support each other.

Figure 2. Word cloud (wordclouds.com) showing high frequency words appearing in tweets related to OU languages



3.1.3. Sentiment analysis

The high frequency words appeared to have an overall positive sentiment, but in order to test this fully, a sentiment analysis was carried out on the words identified in 3.1.2 to categorise which words were positive, negative, or neutral in sentiment. Each positive word was given a plus one value, negative words a minus one, and neutral words zero. However, when looking at the list of high frequency words which appeared more than five times, none of them could be considered inherently negative (such as ‘bad’, ‘sorry’, or ‘tough’) and therefore none of the high frequency words received a minus one score. By multiplying the score of plus one by the number of times a positive word was used (for example happy is

used eight times so $8 \times 1 = 8$), a score of 311 was achieved (see Table 3 below), which represented the overall sentiment score of the interactions (see Sheet 2 of Appendix 1). This shows that the sentiment of the tweets related to OU languages is overwhelmingly positive in tone and that students and teachers alike use Twitter in a positive way to interact with peers, the course, and their learning.

Table 3. Examples of positive high frequency words and their frequency

Happy (8)	Love (7)	Congratulations (7)
Thank/Thanks (25)	Great (12)	Enjoy (10)
Overall sentiment score: 311		

Figure 3. Images of encouraging tweets related to OU languages



Twitter, and social media in general, has often been regarded as a negative arena where users are open to abusive messages. However, this research has shown that in this particular academic language learning environment within Twitter, this is rarely the case and instead, Twitter, as a platform open to all language

learners, offers a positive support network to those users. The mutual respect fostered in class or VLE forum discussions simply migrates to the more open social media platform. [Figure 3](#) above shows examples of how students support each other, and how support and encouragement is offered by teachers.

3.1.4. Overall findings

Overall, the evidence shows that students and teachers are creating positive interactions in this open online space. Students appreciate having direct access to those associated with the university in order to receive information related to their studies but also to be able to communicate their enjoyment of the course and celebrate their successes. As a distance learner, the opportunity to interact in this sociable and non-pressurised way is an excellent open resource for students and we as language teachers can assist them in this space in their language learning and engagement with learning. Students can, over time, build their own PLN which they can continue to stay in contact with even when their studies end. This provides the dual purpose of helping students throughout their studies and assisting with retention between courses. Overall, this can lead to greater student interaction and engagement not only within Twitter but in their current course and during their full degree pathway.

3.2. Survey research on OU language students using Twitter

A pilot survey was designed to directly ask OU language students how they used Twitter alongside their language study and to assess its benefits to them. A copy of the questionnaire along with response data can be seen in [Appendix 2](#). It attracted only a small number of participants (n=13) but did show interesting results in relation to how students use Twitter as part of their study and, in some cases, their language acquisition.

3.2.1. General use

One of the starkest results from the survey was that almost all respondents (12 of the 13) accessed Twitter daily, showing how regularly the platform is used and

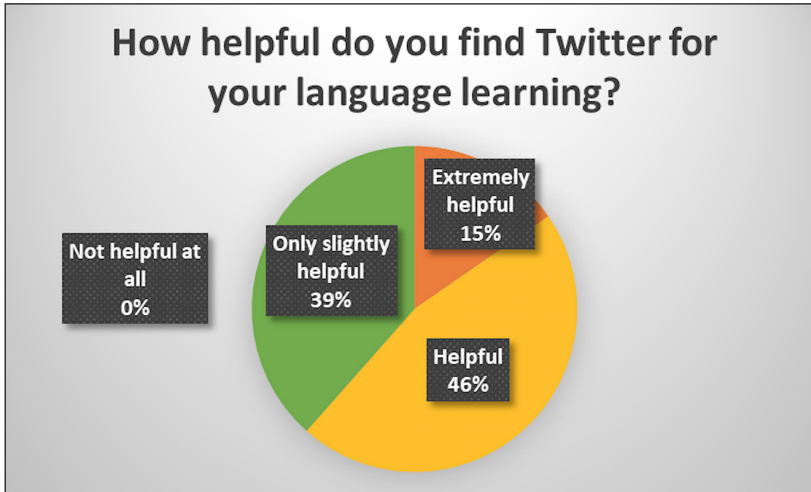
how easy it is to communicate with students in this way. However, only two thirds of them said that they accessed Twitter more than once a week specifically with the purpose of assisting with their language learning and studies. Yet, despite not logging in to Twitter specifically with this purpose, they are automatically seeing information posted by those they follow on their timeline. If students are following their teachers or the institutional account, they can be targeted with information related to assessment due dates or upcoming lessons even when they are not seeking this out, leading to increased exposure to this important course information. Twitter would not be a suitable replacement for learning content but it can be extremely useful to drip-feed information and support, which surpasses what can be achieved in VLE forums.

3.2.2. *Study support*

All the students who responded follow Twitter accounts run by OU teachers, with more than half of the students following all the accounts relating to the course they are studying, and are therefore exposed to relevant course information in their timelines. As shown in [Figure 4](#) below, everyone considered following these accounts helpful to some extent, with no-one stating that they found it unhelpful. This shows that students feel this is a positive addition to their studies.

However, only two of the students said they regularly communicate with other OU students via Twitter to help with their language practice or to receive study support, with the vast majority saying they rarely or never use Twitter for this purpose. It appears that many students considered their reason for following course-related Twitter feeds is to access information rather than actively aiming to build a learning community with other students. However, this contrasted with responses to the question on whether Twitter helped students to feel part of an online community. In this case, eight responded with slightly and four definitely, with only one student saying it did not help. These figures would indicate that although students are not actively seeking out a support community, this happens naturally over time as they connect with other OU students and interact using Twitter.

Figure 4. Pie chart showing results from survey Question 6



One of the open questions gave students the opportunity to explain how they felt Twitter helped them in their language learning. Responses fell into two distinct categories. Firstly, students identified the ability to view authentic text in the target language as an advantage including news and articles, informal materials, text message language, and colloquialisms. Secondly, while 12 of the 13 respondents found Twitter helped them feel part of a learning community, two students specifically mentioned in the open responses the importance of the support network on Twitter for direct assistance and students sharing best practice tips. One student explains,

“OU learning can feel that it is a remote experience especially with the cutback on face to face tutorials. Twitter is not a replacement for personal contact but it is a useful tool for sharing experience”.

3.2.3. *Involvement of institution*

The final closed question asked if students felt that the OU should be facilitating student communication via Twitter. All the respondents agreed with the OU

using Twitter but about half of them felt that support should primarily be offered via the course forums. In the final open question, students were asked for any further comments related to their use of Twitter alongside their studies. Students highlighted that it helped them to communicate with the OU and with fellow students and allowed them to receive information with less pressure to get directly involved than in VLE forums. Students recognised that Twitter is currently underused by the university and there needs to be a ‘revolution’ in how it is used to support students and give them a voice. Students also pointed out the many ways Twitter can help with communication through use of emojis, links, and photos to enhance a message and that the “character restriction on Twitter does help users to develop skills in precis and identifying/prioritising key points” (Appendix 2). Essentially the OU as a distance learning organisation which relies heavily on technology to interact with our students should be pushing information to students instead of forcing them to pick it up from the institution’s sites.

4. Conclusions

4.1. Top tips

The following tips for language teachers using Twitter have been adapted from Johnson (2009) and Zhang (2018):

- authenticity before marketing – *have personality, inspire conversation;*
- do not just publish news – *personalise for your followers;*
- use separate accounts – *more privacy;*
- reply and retweet – *the more you give, the more you receive;*
- follow everyone who follows you – *it’s for conversation and collaboration;*

- take part in chats – *learn from other academics and build your peer community. Try the weekly #LTHEchat, #MFLchat and #AdvanceHE chat;*
- do not tweet about your coffee – *add value to your followers;*
- do not only tweet your own content, participate and retweet – *share news, blogs or tweets from others;*
- do not automate messages – *comes across as spam. If you've time, send a personal message thanking new followers;* and
- limit tweets to five per day – *less is more. Unless taking part in a chat, avoid tweeting lots of messages at once, then being silent for a week. Spread out tweets and keep them relevant.*

4.2. What did the research show?

Overall the survey and tweet research has shown that Twitter can offer an open, free, and easily accessible platform for students and teachers to interact and communicate. It helps to build a learning community which supports students and can also support language learning and practice. As [Ricoy and Feliz \(2016\)](#) point out, if universities are to remain innovative, they need to incorporate social media and embrace the digital culture and the opportunities for learning, accessibility, and collaboration that it brings.

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and experience to the research, as well as the students who agreed to have their tweets published in this chapter.

Supplementary materials

A copy of the data collection materials including the survey questionnaire and Excel data can be found on the IRIS database (<https://www.iris-database.org/iris/app/home/detail?id=york:935862>): Appendix 1: Excel worksheet containing data on collected tweets and high frequency words and Appendix 2: Survey questionnaire and response data.

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