



## **Twitter as a Pedagogy of Possibility in Second Language Teacher Education**

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### **Abstract**

*The incorporation of social media into the contemporary classroom has revolutionised teaching and learning. One such social networking platform, Twitter, provides users with the ability to share 140-character messages, known as tweets, with other users of the service. While this microblogging platform offers numerous affordances for learning, little research exists which examines its effectiveness as a learning tool in second language pedagogy. This paper examines the perceptions of sixty-four pre-service elementary teachers regarding the use of Twitter as a pedagogical tool in a second language pedagogy course. The course focused on the teaching of the Irish language as a second language. Irish, or Gaeilge, is an autochthonous language spoken in the Republic of Ireland and is a compulsory subject in government-funded English-medium primary schools. The social networking web application was integrated into the twelve-week course pedagogy in educationally relevant and productive ways and students were invited to post Twitter feeds outside of class in the Irish language to complement and extend in-class work. The theoretically driven pedagogical basis for the intervention was to enhance content knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge (Shulman, 1987) of the Irish language. Data were collected from a variety of sources e.g. online survey, module questionnaires, focus groups and students' tweets. This research provides evidence to indicate the effectiveness of Twitter as a pedagogical tool in second language pedagogy from a student-informed perspective. Findings suggest that the collaborative nature of online interaction was central to developing both students' linguistic and pedagogical resources in Irish. Twitter was used in intense and multifaceted ways which promoted engagement, a positive learning experience, self-directed practices, a support network and the sharing of resources. Implications for educators, researchers and educational institutions will also be considered in relation to the potential uses of Twitter as a pedagogy of possibility in second language pedagogy.*

*Keywords: social media, second language pedagogy, content knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge, pedagogy of possibility*

### **1. Introduction**

In the Republic of Ireland, all elementary teachers teach Irish as a second language (L2) in government-funded English-medium elementary schools. While it is assumed that teachers are proficient users and models of Irish and display a broad range of advanced linguistic skills and competences, this is not always the case. Some teachers lack linguistic proficiency and are unable to implement a convincing pedagogy (Department of Education and Skills, 2007, 2013). Initial teacher education and professional development experiences are key drivers of successful L2 language education. They are critical to the supply of teachers with the mandatory linguistic competencies as well as the relevant pedagogical practices required to ensure learners' success in Irish. In light of the challenges outlined above, creative responses to the teaching of Irish in initial teacher education are clearly called for. This paper outlines how the microblogging and social media platform, *Twitter*, supported pre-service elementary teachers in developing the essential knowledge-base of second language teaching. The theoretically driven pedagogical basis for the intervention was to enhance *content knowledge* and *pedagogical content knowledge* (Shulman, 1987) of the Irish language.

### **2. The essential knowledge-base of the second language (L2) teacher**

The skill set of an L2 teacher may be operationalized in a construct known as Teacher Language Awareness (TLA). TLA consists of three specific knowledge domains - language use, knowledge about language, and pedagogical expertise in terms of the target language (Andrews, 2007). These domains interact with and impact on each other in complex ways which in turn shapes an L2 teacher's capacity to craft language goals and activities which target learners' developmental needs. It would appear then that TLA in the L2 should underpin a teacher's instructional practices.

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The first domain of TLA, the 'User' domain (Wright, 2002) is operationalized as a certain level of language proficiency i.e. the teacher's own command of the L2. It is essential that the teacher is a proficient user and model of the language and displays a broad range of advanced linguistic skills and competences. The second domain encompasses knowledge about language (KAL) in the form of a teacher's grasp of language systems and structures, as well as their knowledge of specific skills, lexicon, grammar, semantics, pragmatics, orthography, phonology, sociolinguistics, discourse analysis and discipline-specific language (Bartels, 2009; Wray, 1993). This domain of linguistic knowledge is often referred to as *content knowledge* (Shulman, 1987) and is termed the "Analyst" domain, to signify the teacher as a capable analyst of linguistic structures. In addition to *content knowledge* (CK), L2 teachers also need to know how to transform this declarative knowledge of the L2 into effective pedagogical tasks, a domain often referred to as *pedagogical content knowledge* (Shulman, 1987). This third domain of TLA entails an understanding of the process by which L2 students acquire languages, a comprehension of how to design instructional strategies that push language development forward and a capacity to create a meaningful and relevant context which promotes L2 language learning and development (Andrews, 2003; Yates & Muchisky, 2003). This is termed the "Teacher" domain. This domain highlights the ability of teachers to embed knowledge related to their language proficiency and KAL in L2 lesson design and subsequent practices. It would appear that an advanced proficiency in the L2 should underpin a teacher's L2 instructional practices.

### 3. Transforming L2 language learning through *Twitter*

The rapid increase of new technologies has inspired language educators to leverage these new technologies in creative ways across a wide range of L2 teaching contexts. One such social media web application, *Twitter*, enables users to post and interact with messages, "tweets", restricted to 140 characters. Research evidence about the impact of *Twitter* use on language learning consistently identifies positive benefits. *Twitter* leads to better recall of concepts (Blessing, Blessing, & Fleck, 2012), fosters collaboration among L2 students (Kassens-Noor, 2012), stimulates L2 production (Kim, Park, & Baek, 2011) and enhances communicative and cultural competence (Borau, Ullrich, Feng & Shen, 2009). It would appear then that the integration of *Twitter* as a pedagogical tool in a second language pedagogy course in initial teacher education offers potential for increased TLA.

### 4. Research design

In order to gain insights into participants' experiences throughout the process, as well as the effectiveness of the use of *Twitter* on L2 learning, the research focused on the following research question:

- How does *Twitter* support pre-service teachers in developing the essential knowledge-base of L2 teaching of the Irish language?

*Twitter* was integrated into a twelve-week course pedagogy which focused on the teaching of the Irish language as an L2. Sixty-four pre-service elementary teachers were assigned a weekly task which resulted in posting two *Twitter* feeds in the Irish language outside of scheduled class time. They were also encouraged to respond to other students' reactions. Posts had defined purposes and were intended to complement and extend in-class work. Through *Twitter* use, students were encouraged to demonstrate understandings, submit responses to prompts/readings, share and acquire resources and ideas, ask questions and seek clarification, give feedback, analyse, evaluate and create resources and make connections and reflect on learning. These principles guided *Twitter* integration. Data were collected from a variety of sources e.g. online survey, module questionnaires, focus groups and students' tweets. A comprehensive set of descriptive accounts of codes mapping the nature and range of the experiences reported was prepared during data analysis. The themes that emerged are described below and when considered altogether capture students' language learning experiences as a whole.

### 5. Findings and discussion

Findings are presented from a student-informed perspective and suggest that *Twitter* has powerful pedagogical potential in second language pedagogy in initial teacher education.

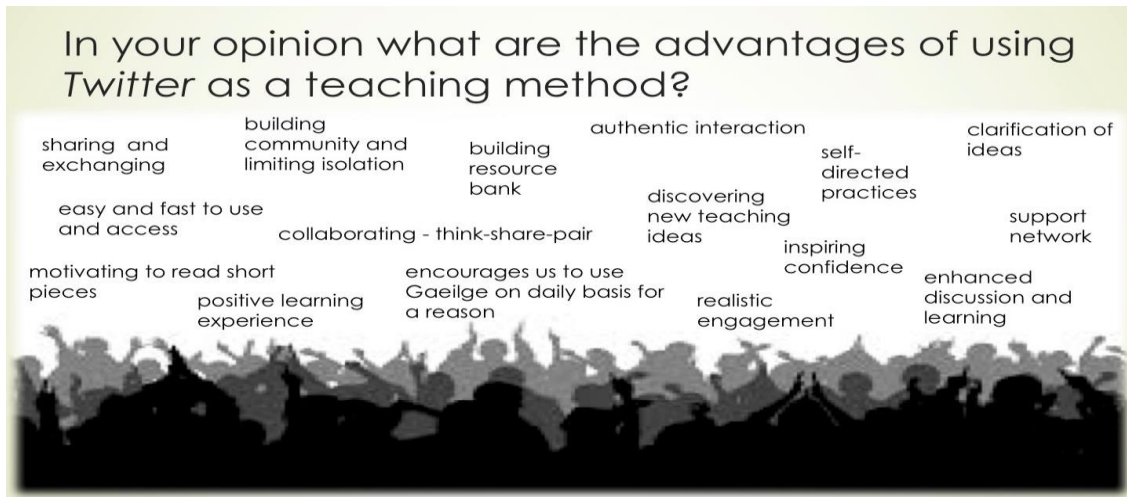
#### 5.1 Collaboration, engagement and personal empowerment

L2 pre-service teachers revealed that the collaborative nature of *Twitter* and the structured weekly tasks gave them a reason to attend to language and engage in language practice in meaningful,



relevant and realistic ways. This experience in turn ensured reflection, self-directed learning and personal empowerment. Students' perceptions regarding the advantages of infusing *Twitter* in the L2 course pedagogy are outlined in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Students' perceptions of the advantages of using *Twitter* as a teaching method



## 5.2 Development of teacher language awareness

The collaborative nature of online interaction was central to developing both students' linguistic and pedagogical resources in Irish (CK & PCK). During focus group interviews, students explained how using Irish in everyday life developed their language skills and gave them more confidence in using the L2 in authentic ways. They also revealed that they became more language-aware and language-informed users and were prompted to self-monitor and self-correct posts before tweeting. Students became motivated and self-directed learners and sought assistance regarding grammar, vocabulary and sentence structure in particular, prior to tweeting. These experiences developed CK.

Figure 2. Student perceptions of CK development of Irish through *Twitter* usage



Students also commented that *Twitter* usage provided insights into age-appropriate and stimulating L2 methodologies. Reading other tweets afforded students time to think, to reflect, to learn and to engage in additional research. Students became highly motivated users as they shared and learned with and from others. They were stimulated to critique online resources and ideas and seek out appropriate ones, thus developing PCK.



Figure 3. Student perceptions of PCK development of Irish through Twitter usage



## 6. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the design of teaching strategies, practices and tasks related to virtual engagement and collaboration through *Twitter* usage is instrumental to achieving increased TLA. It also highlights evidence-based practices for using *Twitter* in educationally relevant and productive ways in L2 education. However, it is important to note that *Twitter* as a pedagogical tool in L2 education has affordances and strengths. Concerns regarding privacy, academic integrity and the *always-on nature* of social media are warranted. Conversely, some of the most powerful affordances of *Twitter* are embedding activities and language in real-world environments and fostering class community while making available all the resources of a global network. Even though, it may be challenging to craft tasks which simultaneously develop CK and PCK of the L2, this study demonstrates that it is essential to have a theoretical basis for the infusion of *Twitter* into L2 course pedagogy so as to untap full educational potential.

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