

## Twitter and English Pronunciation Teaching

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### Abstract

*Language teaching is increasingly benefitting from Web 2.0 tools such as blogs, e-learning environments or even social networking services (SNSs). With social networks rapidly gaining prominence in this scenario, Twitter is emerging as a tool that can be used for different educational purposes. Twitter is already being used to teach vocabulary or to disseminate general information and links for language learning. However, it can also be used to teach pronunciation, an often neglected aspect in the curriculum. As a case in point, this paper describes the results of a pilot study aimed at testing Twitter's effectiveness for pronunciation teaching. More specifically, the aim was to teach the pronunciation of a number of English words considered to be problematic for Spanish learners of EFL. The study was carried out with 8 students –4 studying at a state-run School of Languages and 4 in their first year of a degree in English Studies at the University of Murcia, Spain. The students were sent a number of tweets, each of them featuring a word of difficult pronunciation –difficulties arising from sound-spelling correspondences, lexical stress or the presence of silent letters (e.g. ai(s)le). Students received a daily tweet illustrating the pronunciation of words shown to be mispronounced by the students in a pre-test session. After the Twitter-based interaction finished, students were tested again. The results show that the instruction had a beneficial effect on the students' pronunciation of the target words. The best results were obtained by those students who were more actively engaged in the twitter-based instruction. Students were able to remember and pronounce accurately most of the words that they had mispronounced in the pre-test session. Implications of the results for the teaching of English pronunciation and the use of Twitter in language teaching are also offered.*

### 1. Introduction

Despite being initially conceived of as platforms that allow people to be up-to-date and interact with others, the potential SNSs have for learning is not in question any longer. Several studies have dealt with the way these networks can be implemented for educational purposes [e.g. 1, 3, 4, 8]. However, important and relevant issues now centre on *what* SNSs are most suitable for language learning, for *what particular aspects* of language and *how* can SNSs be implemented for such purposes.

In this paper we focus on *Twitter*, one of the simplest but also most popular SNSs world-wide. Twitter has been used for a variety of purposes, ranging from daily chatter, sharing information or reporting the news [5], to the promotion of blogs or discussion of ideas [4]. As for the uses of Twitter for educational-related purposes, these range from 'following' experts in the field [3] to facilitating discussion or encouraging participation in the classroom [2].

### 2. Using Twitter for pronunciation: A preliminary study

After the favourable reception enjoyed by a number of studies on the teaching of vocabulary items through SMS [6, 7, 9], we wanted to test Twitter's effectiveness to teach the pronunciation of a number of words which pose special difficulty for Spanish EFL learners. If instruction via SMS can be effective, using a social networking service very similar to SMS both in its conciseness (160 vs. 140 characters) and in its accessibility via computer, mobile devices, etc. should yield very positive results. Twitter is particularly promising in that it does not imply any cost for either teachers or learners, allowing them to send as many messages as they need and to share video and audio files, an asset to pronunciation teaching.

Of all the possible advantages that Twitter may offer for language learning, the present study addresses the following question of whether Twitter can help students improve their pronunciation of a number of problematic words. A number of Twitter accounts already focus on pronunciation, posting the pronunciation of words and sentences on a regular basis (e.g. *Forvo* or *Pronunciation Book*), so pronunciation is not alien to online instruction with SNSs. Given this, it is hypothesised that Twitter will be able to help students with their pronunciation, allowing them self-correction of target words. This is based on the fact that Twitter can accommodate audio/video-sharing files, which allow easy access to

speech material. Twitter facilitates the provision of brief but overt explanations about problematic issues together with authentic language samples illustrating the target words in context.

## 2.1 Method

### *Participants*

Eight native speakers of Spanish participated in this study. Four of them were studying English at an Official Language School (group 1; mean age 29.5 years) and four were starting a four-year university degree in English studies (group 2; mean age 19.3 years). Their level of English was generally B1, according to the Common European Framework.

### *Stimuli*

75 items considered to be problematic for Spanish learners of EFL were chosen from a databank of past pronunciation errors in exams by Spanish students of EFL, as well as well-known pronunciation mistakes from anecdotal evidence. These words featured silent letters, such as <b> in *de(b)t*, lexical stress, such as word-initial stress in *politics*, and phoneme-grapheme/s correspondences, such as <s> = /ʃ/ in *sugar*.

The 75 words were intermixed with 25 distractor items in order to create a pre-test. The results obtained led to the further selection of 27 items for group 1 and 31 for group 2. With these items, a battery of tweets was created featuring the target words.

Tweets consisted of a short explicit explanation about the problematic issue and a link to a video or audio file where students could listen to the target word pronounced in context. Phonemic transcription was kept to a minimum, the use of symbols was made only to refer to individual phonemes, but full transcriptions of words were avoided.

## 2.2 Procedure

In a preliminary stage of the study, a pre-test was administered in order to verify that students did not know the correct pronunciation of the target words. The pre-test was a simple oral matching task in which students were asked to associate words with colours based on their impressions. Participants were not told that the focus was on pronunciation. On the one hand, this type of task was meant to make students engage in an activity that would prevent them from concentrating excessively on the pronunciation of the items. On the other hand, the task guaranteed that participants were not going to talk about or check the pronunciation of the target words –which might compromise the results regarding the actual gains obtained from the instruction.

The Twitter-based instruction took place during 6 weeks, with tweets sent daily from Monday to Friday. The researchers would post a tweet featuring target words and students, after reading the tweet, had to confirm having read the tweet and, if they thought it appropriate, comment on the tweet, with so-called reading confirmation tweets.

After the study took place, participants received a post-test interview. This interview was an oral production task in which participants had to read the words that had been taught during the instruction period.

## 2.3 Results and discussion

The results reveal that Twitter *can* have a beneficial effect on students' pronunciation of the words presented, although its benefits are highly dependent on the students' degree of participation.

A measure of the students' involvement can be obtained by the number of reading confirmation tweets by each student (Rtw) during the instruction period (see Table 1). These data cannot guarantee that students had understood the information provided in the tweets but they are a gauge of an actual 'encounter' with the tweet and therefore also a potential gain in the student's pronunciation of the target words. Those target words pronounced correctly by participants in the pre-test session are not taken into account since they do not represent any potential gains. As can be seen in Table 1, group 1 was significantly more involved than group 2, having read the vast majority of tweets (98.1%) while the other group read only slightly more than half of the total tweets (62.4%).

Group 1			Group 2		
Ps	Rtw	%	Ps	Rtw	%
P1	26/27	96.3%	P5	17/30	56.7%
P2	26/27	96.3%	P6	13/29	44.8%
P3	27/27	100%	P7	12/25	48%
P4	27/27	100%	P8	30/30	100%
Total		<b>98.1%</b>	Total		<b>62.4%</b>

Table 1. No. of tweets and rate read by participants.

The participation rates directly correlate with the gains obtained from the instruction. Table 2 shows the number of target words that participants pronounced correctly in the post-test (✓) as well as the gain rate (%). Group 1 –the more actively involved– performed substantially better than group 2 in the post-test, having obtained a gain rate of 70.4%, as opposed to the 45.2% obtained by group 2.

Group 1			Group 2		
Ps	✓	%	Ps	✓	%
P1	24/27	88.8%	P5	10/30	33.3%
P2	16/27	59.3%	P6	12/29	41.4%
P3	17/27	63%	P7	14/25	56%
P4	19/27	70.4%	P8	15/30	50%
Total		<b>70.4%</b>	Total		<b>45.2%</b>

Table 2. No. and rates of target words pronounced correctly in the post-test.

However, it could be argued that the data on Table 2 is not a real measure of Twitter's appropriateness for the instruction given that it does not take into account those tweets that students missed. If participants did not read a tweet, in theory, they should not learn about the pronunciation of the target word featured in that tweet either. Therefore, if a tweet was not learnt because students did not read it, the problem would not be the medium, but the lack of motivation. Thus, a further analysis can be carried out by looking at the the number of words that were pronounced correctly in the post-test as compared to the total number of words that participants read (see Table 3).

Group 1			Group 2		
Ps	✓	%	Ps	✓	%
P1	23/26	88.5%	P5	6/17	35.3%
P2	16/26	61.5%	P6	4/13	30.8%
P3	17/27	63%	P7	8/12	66.7%
P4	19/27	70.4%	P8	15/29	51.7%
Total		<b>70.8%</b>	Total		<b>46.1%</b>

Table 3. No. and rate of target words pronounced correctly by participants for their 'read' tweets.

The results in Table 3 reveal that the gain rate in both groups is only slightly higher than the data in Table 2. Therefore, even if students did read the tweets, the percentage of 'intake' is still quite low in the second group. However, the results also reveal that there was a considerable number of words not read/commented on by students but which were nevertheless pronounced correctly in the post-test (P1=1; P5=4; P6=8; P7=10). This suggests that participants may have read the tweet but forgot to reply/comment, or that they may have benefited from vicarious learning when reading tweets by other participants. Nevertheless, a thorough discussion of this and other variables is not possible here due to limitations of space.

### 3. Conclusions

The present study offers some preliminary results on the use of Twitter for pronunciation teaching. The results suggest that Twitter *can* be useful in order to teach the pronunciation of a number of problematic words, although only if certain conditions are met. As it would happen in any type of

instruction, the more engaged and motivated students are, the more likely they are to benefit from it. In the results above, although group 2 did not obtain very positive results, the data in Table 1 show that the level of involvement was very low too whereas group 1, whose level of participation was significantly higher, did obtain quite positive results.

Despite its potential, Twitter may also be considered to have limitations for pronunciation teaching such as production training. However, it should be noted that the present study did not intend to improve the learners' actual production of phonemes or stress patterns, but to draw their attention to *what* phonemes they should pronounce, *where* the stress should be placed, or what letters were silent in a number of words that students had trouble with. It was considered that students would be able to self-correct themselves since the target words did not represent potential difficulties of articulation, but a considerable disparity between orthography and pronunciation (e.g. *archives* with /k/ instead of /tʃ/).

As a practical application of the current study SNSs-oriented teachers might consider implementing Twitter in their teaching with 'words/tips of the day', as an extra support to classroom instruction. Several twitter accounts already post a 'word of the day' for the teaching of vocabulary items (e.g. *CambridgeWords*, *Farlex* or *OxfordWords*).

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