The Effect of Using Twitter on Improving EFL Students' Writing: A Case Study

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ABSTRACT: *Web 2.0 has evidently become an essential interaction tool with educational content in recent years. This study therefore had aimed to explore the Twitter approach and examine the students' perception of the approach, particularly at a higher institution of learning. Twitter was integrated as an instructional tool to deliver a course on writing. 102 EFL Master and PhD post graduate students participated in the study. Twitter was used to share material, class information, discuss among other things. An online self-designed questionnaire was administered to gather data on the students' views of the approach prior to and after the semester ended. This study found that the students were generally in favor of the incorporation of Twitter as a platform to acquire additional information on the subject as well as a means of enhancing interaction. The PhD students appeared to be more positive than the Master students, albeit, both groups favored the approach. Some implications for using of Twitter as a helpful social micro blogging site in class are made in this paper.*

KEYWORDS - *Twitter, Web 2.0, higher education, pedagogy, micro blogging site, social networking, EFL postgraduate and graduate students*

I   INTRODUCTION

Utilization of Web2.0 has spread recently among different societies. It represents a group of websites and technologies that uphold interaction, participation, and collaboration. Since becoming exponentially popular in the late 1990s [1], these social web sites appear to be an area of interest among researchers in higher education institutions, i.e. in searching for methods to motivate students to be more engaged [2] in their learning process. Higher education institutions form a good professional system that used technologies to deliver courses, such as online courses to enhance effectiveness of their delivery [3]. Technologies aid in reinforcing the relevancy of course learning with modern links to electronic centered teaching. Authors in [4] noted that social networking in higher education appears to be an indispensable part in students' lives. Numerous research conducted have reported both the benefits and drawbacks of integrating technology into higher education classrooms [5].

The most frequent positive aspect reported is that it facilitates interaction and provides a platform for active participants in their learning [3]. Albeit, negative aspects of social networking in pedagogical setting, such as information outflow, loss of concentration, and unprofessional interactions are noted, the study interests in the main benefits of improved communication between students and monitors.

II   REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Twitter can be of specific interest in higher education, particularly due to the amount of data and the layout through which it is presented. Researchers in [6][7] have reported an increase in the usage of Twitters as an educational tool. Micro blogging sites permit participants to post 140-letters message (a tweet), contribute to other participants' tweets (retweet), indicate other members' tweets with the @ sign (tag), respond to tweets and interact with others through messages.

Once a participant registers on a social network like Twitter, other members can follow him; all members always follow whatever that is shared on twitter [8]. Recently, Twitter has been identified as one of the most used social networks in the world, and it is known as "email 2.0".

A study by Junco [4] found that high engagement through the utilization of tools, such as Twitter would permit students to evolve retention, class enjoyment, and professional achievement. Numerous studies point to Twitter as a learning tool that facilitates communication with students [4] [9] [10] [11] conducted a two-section comparative study, and found that students who produced the large number of tweets in the second half of the course were passive in the first phase. Such a change demonstrates students' increased digital abilities,

since they grew more skilled in communicating with Twitter as the course progressed. In fact, different studies have demonstrated that tweeting is regarded as a more interactive way of learning compared to traditional knowledge transfer ways like lectures [12]. One of the most common social technologies according to authors in [13] include social networking sites (SNS) mainly Facebook, Twitter, MySpace and LinkedIn, due to the fact social networking applications have quickly developed, and expanded in many forms can be applied in a classroom environment especially if the study focuses on their practical use rather than merely soliciting views from either students or instructors. Although the widespread of the web and social networking practices in Algeria, the situation in its higher institutions is profoundly different. Technology is seldom made accessible for both teachers and learners despite the recent educational reforms which insisted on the integration of technology, and multimedia laboratories in particular, in higher education. These reforms are displayed in the LMD system (Licence, Master, Doctorat); a system that has been adopted at the Algerian Institutions since 2004.

The LMD system's emphasis on the combination of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) and multilingualism is demonstrated in the addition of a transversal teaching unit in the official curriculum including compulsory foreign languages and ICT classes. However, little is done to ensure the relevancy of such principles. There is no systematic implementation of any technological tool, for instance Twitter or Face book in the EFL courses. Also, teachers are not encouraged to use modern technologies due to their limited access to ICT facilities at work, outmoded language laboratories, class size and the constant state of flux at the level of administrative management of the language departments and faculties. Conventional media such as handouts and white boards remain useful tools, always accessible and available .Yet; it is time to make the leap towards exploiting the potential advantage of this technology in our educational classrooms. With research findings pointing to promising benefits to increased interaction and communication, it is not surprising that it is perceived positively among users [14]. However, with no research conducted to exam the postgraduate students' perception of Twitter, this study was thus conducted to examine the perception of this group of students toward Twitter before and after the study.

III AIM, OBJECTIVES AND RESEARCH QUESTION

With twitter being subscribed as a pedagogical tool, this study had aimed to incorporate Twitter in a writing class, which Master and PhD students attend. Specifically the objectives were to assess the students' perception of the integration of Twitter into a pedagogy class across different levels of higher education. Thus, the research question addressed in this study was: How do the students perceive the integration of Twitter into their learning process?

IV RESEARCH METHOD

To gauge the effects of incorporating technology into courses, Twitter was used into a graduation class of 50 (17 males and 33 females) master and 52 doctoral female EFL students. The participants used Twitter as a tool in their writing class once per week and which was held over four months. An account as a hub to launch course interaction with individuals was managed by the teacher. The students were asked to follow the class accounts and participate in discussions on the topic through concise messages or useful links related to writing.

During the first week, the instructor explained how to use Twitter and its traits including mentions and re tweeting, and students were encouraged to practice in and out the class; they are required to follow each other's accounts.

The teacher will post a topic (written, a video, a link...) - tweet related to the Writing Syllabus on their accounts, so as the rest of the classroom would re tweet on the topic using links or writing paragraphs that they should comment on immediately and cooperatively with their classmates. And the instructor checked the hub account to provide feedback as needed and encouraged students to tweet their own responses.

Later, a quantitative approach, using a questionnaire which employed to examine the students' experiences, the usage and familiarity of social micro blogging sites, was adopted in this study. The questionnaire was administered to the EFL students undertaking their Masters and PhD program at the University of Laghouat-Algeria, Department of English. Students who volunteered to participate in the study answered the online questionnaire at the beginning of the first semester.

The questionnaire comprised three sections: the first section to gather data on the background of the participants, the second section is specifically to gather data on the use of web2.0 in general within higher education and the third section is to assess the students' attitudes towards the use of twitter in their learning. A mixed mode method was adopted to gather data on the students' perception of the use of twitter in teaching and learning. The quantitative approach, using a questionnaire, which employed to examine the students' experiences, the usage and familiarity of social micro blogging sites, was adopted in this study.

V   RESULTS

The analysis of quantitative data is presented as statistical as well as descriptive statistic, i.e. in the form of frequencies in this section. The number of micro blogging sites, such as blogs, twitter and Facebook that the postgraduate students use appears to be limited to mostly one site. Of the 102 students, 75.5 per cent reported using at least one site. However, a slightly larger proportion of PhD students (34% students) tend to use more than 1 site compared to the Master students (12 % students).

Table 1: Number of micro blogging sites (Blogs, Twitter, and Facebook) visited

	No of micro blogging sites visited			
	0 (%)	1 (%)	2 (%)	>3 (%)
PhD students (n=50)	2 (4)	31 (62)	12 (24)	5 (10)
Master students (n=52)	21 (42)	23 (46)	6 (12)	0 (0)
Total	23 (22.5)	54 (53.9)	18 (17.7)	5 (4.9)

As seen in Table 1, a larger proportion of the 75.5 per cent students, 70.1 per cent visit only one in comparison, the PhD students (62%) tend to use at least one site compared to the Master students (46%). Almost half the Master students appear to not favor micro blogging sites; only 56 percent students reported using one to two sites.

The limited use of micro blogging sites is also reflected in the frequency of use of the sites. Table 2 shows the frequency count of the usage and we can see that the PhD students tend to use the sites on a daily basis (70.84%) compared to the Master students who prefer to visit the sites less frequently, i.e. one hour per week (41.38%).

Table 2: Frequency of use of micro blogging sites

	Never (%)	Hourly (%)	Daily (%)	1hr/Week (%)	>1hr/Week (%)
PhD students (n=50)	0 (0)	10 (20.83)	34 (70.84)	0 (0)	4 (8.33)
Master students (n=52)	0 (0)	1 (3.45)	6 (20.69)	10 (34.48)	12 (41.38)
Total	0 (0)	11 (14.3)	40 (51.9)	10 (129)	16 (20.8)

When asked if the micro blogging sites would be useful or otherwise, of the 77 students who reported they visit the sites, approximately 50 per cent found them useful. It is not surprising to find that the PhD students, who use these sites, tend to favor them and find them more useful (60.84% students) in class. A larger proportion of the Master students, who used these sites, found them a waste of time (37.9% students). Less than 30 per cent of the students found the sites both useful as well as a waste of time.

Table 3: Usefulness of the use of the sites in class

	Useful (%)	Waste of Time (%)	Both (%)	Uncertain (%)
PhD students (n=48)	29 (60.84)	7 (14.58)	10 (20.83)	2 (4.17)
Master students (n=29)	7 (24.14)	11 (37.9)	8 (27.59)	3 (10.34)
Total	36 (46.8)	18 (23.3)	18 (23.3)	5 (6.5)

As seen in Table 4, both group of students clearly in favor of the online setting over formal class setting. Both groups recorded more than 60 per cent in favor of the online setting (PhD students: 87.5%; Master students: 65.52%).

Table 4: Preference for online live setting over formal class setting

	Yes (%)	No (%)	Uncertain (%)
PhD students (n=48)	42 (87.5)	6 (12.5)	0 (0)
Master students (n=29)	19 (65.52)	8 (27.59)	2 (6.9)
Total	61 (79.2)	14 (18.2)	2 (2.6)

Table 5 presents the students' views as to whether technology could improve the communication among students. Albeit a small proportion of students were uncertain, the same proportion of student who referred the online setting as seen in Table 4 consented that it provides a platform for communication, i.e. 79.2 per cent students.

Table 5: Student perception of use of technology to enhance communication

	Yes (%)	No (%)	Uncertain (%)
PhD students (n=48)	41 (85.42)	5 (10.42)	2 (4.17
Master students (n=29)	19 (65.52)	8 (27.59)	2 (6.9)
Total	60 (78.0)	13 (16.9)	4 (5.2)

Although both groups of students (59.8 %) perceived online interaction can replace face-to-face interaction, they differed in their views in terms of preferred mode of interaction. A larger proportion of the PhD students (81.25%) felt that online interaction can replace face-to-face interaction. The Master students think otherwise as close of 60 per cent of the students felt it cannot replace conventional interaction.

Table 6: Perception of online interaction replacing face-to-face interaction

	Yes (%)	No (%)	Uncertain (%)
PhD students (n=48)	39 (81.25)	8 (16.67)	1 (2.08)
Master students (n=29)	7 (24.14)	17 (58.62)	5 (17.42)
Total	46 (59.8)	25 (32.4)	6 (7.8)

The students' attitudes towards the use of Twitter as a pedagogical tool were also examined. A comparison was made prior to and after the use of Twitter in the course. Table 7 shows the students' perception of Twitter, specifically in receiving updates during the course before the semester commenced.

Table 7: Perception on receiving updates via Twitter

Pre-semester			
	Yes (%)	No (%)	Uncertain (%)
PhD students (n=50)	25 (50)	20 (40)	5 (10)
Master students (n=52)	10 (20)	28 (56)	12 (24)
Total	35 (34.3)	48 (47.1)	17 (16.6)

As seen in Table 7, when the students were asked to present their views on whether they would be interested in receiving updates via Twitter before the study, we can see that a larger proportion we not keen (47.1%). However, the PhD students were divided in their views as an almost similar proportion noted yes or no. The Master students were more definitive as, a larger proportion of the Master students were clearly certain that they would not be interested in receiving the updates via this tool (No: 56% students).

Table 8: Perception of Twitter as aid in assisting students–teacher interaction

Pre-semester			
	Yes (%)	No (%)	Uncertain (%)
PhD students (n=50)	18 (36)	30 (60)	2 (4)
Master students (n=52)	9 (18)	38 (76)	3 (6)
Total	27 (26.4)	68 (66.6)	5 (5.0)

As seen in Table 8, both groups of students, prior to the study felt that Twitter could not aid in student and teacher interaction (PhD students: 60%; Master students: 76%). Only a small proportion felt that it could assist.

We also compared the students' view before and after the semester to examine their view of whether the Twitter approach would enhance better understanding of the subject matter. Table 9 presents the results.

Table 9: Use of the Twitter approach in enhancing better understanding

	Pre-semester			Post-semester		
	Yes (%)	No (%)	Uncertain (%)	Yes (%)	No (%)	Uncertain (%)
PhD students (n=50)	15 (30)	7 (14)	28 (56)	38 (76)	5 (10)	7 (14)
Master students (n=52)	10 (20)	17 (34)	23 (46)	21 (42)	14 (28)	15 (30)
Total	25 (24.5)	24 (23.5)	51 (50.0)	59 (57.8)	19 (18.6)	22 (21.6)

There actual experience that the students encountered with Twitter had clearly changed the student's perception of the use of Twitter as a teaching tool. The proportion of students who felt that this approach would enhance better understanding of the subject matter clear increased by more than 50 per cent. An increase of 46 per cent of students among the PhD and 20 per cent among the Master students was found after the study. Albeit the proportion of student who felt otherwise before and after the student remained, the students who were initially uncertain of the effects of this approach changed their views.

Table 10: Additional input beyond conventional lessons

Post-semester	Yes (%)	No (%)
PhD students (n=50)	39 (78)	11 (22)
Master students (n=52)	30 (60)	20 (40)
Total	69 (67.6)	31 (30.4)

We can see in Table 10 that the students found Twitter to be a useful tool, i.e. in terms of acquiring additional input beyond that which is delivered via face-to face. However, the PhD students out-numbered the Master students. Almost 80 per cent of the PhD in comparison to 60 percent of the Master students noted they acquired additional input.

Although both groups of students generally favored the use of Twitter in acquiring additional input, they appear to think that it does not really support class interaction. The Masters students clearly are not in favor of the tool as a means of enhancing interaction. While only 36 per cent felt it did, 64 percent felt otherwise. However, the PhD students were divided in their views.

Table11: Twitter layout enhance class interaction

Post-semester	Yes (%)	No (%)
PhD students (n=50)	27 (54)	23 (46)
Master students (n=52)	18 (36)	32 (64)
Total	45 (44.1)	55 (53.9)

The students were also asked if they felt that Facebook could be a better tool to learn a foreign language. We can see in Table 12 that a larger proportion of the PhD students (68%) viewed Facebook as a possible tool to learn a foreign language compared to the Master students (58%).

Table 12: Use of Facebook as a pedagogical tool to learn a foreign language

Post-semester	Yes (%)	No (%)
PhD students (n=50)	42 (68)	8 (32)
Master students (n=52)	28 (58)	22 (42)
Total	70 (68.6)	30 (29.4)

In gauging the students' general perception of the Twitter approach in learning subject content, this study found that students felt that it was conducive as a teaching and learning tool. Once again, although both groups favored the approach, a larger proportion of PhD students favored it compared to the Master students. The Master students were once again divided in their views as the proportion of students appeared almost similar (Table13).

Table 13: Conduciveness of the Twitter approach

Post-semester	Yes (%)	No (%)
PhD students (n=50)	42 (84)	8 (16)
Master students (n=52)	28 (56)	22 (44)
Total	70 (68.6)	30 29.4)

VI. DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Similar to the findings by [15] [16] [17] [18], this study point to Twitter being as an interactive virtual platform for teaching and learning. The students in this study perceived Twitter, albeit with skepticism initially, as a viable pedagogical tool in a writing course.

A change in perception towards the Twitter approach was evident, particularly when students generally visited one site on average and were uncertain of its usefulness before the study. This could be due to the unguided use of the sites. The initial apprehensive of micro blogging sites, however, gradually changed and students were more receptive, particularly when they were introduced to Twitter, in particular, in a class. Students thereafter reported of favorable benefits of Twitter in enhancing communication among students and better understanding of the course.

A comparison of the students' feedback found that the PhD students appear to be in greater favor Twitter as a pedagogical tool and as a useful platform for acquiring information beyond the class content, for improved interaction than the Master students. They reported preference of being more involved with learning through technology in online settings, unlike the Master students, who appear to prefer the conventional

approach of teacher-students interaction in the class. This could partially be due to the level of maturity and confidence of the students. The PhD students would tend to be more self-reliance in doing their PhD compared to the Master students who would generally be dependent learners. Thus, in incorporating Twitter into classrooms, instructors will need to be carefully structure the execution of the approach, particularly for dependent learners.

VII. CONCLUSION

Social networking is one of the most essential interaction tools. Therefore, it is compulsory for these micro blogging sites to be integrated in the classroom as pedagogical reinforcement to extend students' dynamic participation. In a real setting, we found that Twitter can be incorporated easily into a class as another data source. In general, participants in this study exhibited positive attitudes, considered Twitter as an interesting tool to use in the class. Thus, we recommend its use in the other classes with well-explained instructions. Twitter is useful in promoting teachers and learners' collaboration in all disciplines. In fact, in Algerian universities, since there appears to be no obvious incorporation of micro blogging websites practice or instruction, students tend to be apprehensive of its use as an instructional tool in teaching and learning. Students from other cultures might have different opinions and perceptions of using Twitter in higher education. Future research could focus on the issue of how should EFL learners use Twitter in and out of the educational settings as well as examine if the Twitter approach is culturally bound.

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