

Chapter 34

Twitter in Foreign Language Classes: Initiating Learners into Contemporary Language Variation

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ABSTRACT

This chapter looks at the potential of the microblogging tool Twitter as a multifaceted resource for foreign language learners and educators. It highlights how this microblogging and social networking service provides authentic settings that are both dynamic and communicative, and which facilitate the cultural enrichment of first-year French learners, by enhancing their socio-pragmatic awareness and developing their multiliteracy skills in a second language. We argue for the importance of making students aware of this linguistic culture from an early stage of their language studies. This invisible second language culture is rarely discussed in traditional classrooms and only sporadically presented in foreign language textbooks; however, it can easily be experienced in digital environments like Twitter, making it an ideal context for such exposure. Our results suggest that the incorporation of linguistic cultural elements is indispensable to the development of intercultural communicative competence, a skill that paves the way for successful communication across national boundaries and in different electronic discourses.

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INTRODUCTION

For the past three decades, since the acknowledgement that second language (L2) learning goes beyond the mastering of grammatical and lexical forms, a practical interest in pragmatic competence has emerged in the field of second language acquisition (SLA). The attention that has been given to foreign language learners' ability to communicate and interpret meaning in social interactions has resulted in a large body of literature on teaching L2 pragmatics (Taguchi, 2011). In an era of multiculturalism where communication across cultural boundaries plays a significant role, the importance of developing intercultural communicative competence (ICC) in the context of L2 learning and teaching has become a key objective. However, the remaining conundrum is how to fulfill this task in a pedagogically sound way while guiding L2 learners to autonomously continue this development outside of the classroom. Because of the important shifts in our communication landscape, many students have adopted a multimodal and interconnected life that has shaped their way of being, their literacy and their cognitive and learning processes (Thorne, 2013). These new elements have made it crucial for language educators to go beyond print literacy and encompass digital literacies, which play an increasing role in the personal, social, educational and professional lives of today's students (Dudeney et al., 2012). Technology, in general, has immensely enriched our options for L2 instruction, and as Taguchi and Sykes (2013) highlighted, the field of interlanguage pragmatics has demonstrated that technological innovation can enhance teaching by providing new resources to multiple forms of rich input and interaction, all while overcoming various barriers to L2 pragmatic instruction.

There is a general consensus in the literature that foreign language curricula offer little guid-

ance for language teachers in how to promote ICC through language instruction, and as such, traditional foreign language classrooms offer limited opportunities for pragmatic development and learning. This realization stems from the lack of eclecticism within classroom discourse in terms of register and communication situations, and the narrow perspectives presented in language textbooks about pragmatic norms of an L2 (Bardovi-Harlig, 2001; Vellenga, 2004; de Pablo-Ortega, 2011; Eisenclas, 2011; Taguchi, 2011; Timpe, 2014). This is the case for what is viewed as typical speech acts, such as requests, refusals, compliments, apologies and disagreements, but the situation is even more problematic for the pragmatic elements that are the focus of this chapter: abbreviations and use of English words in French. This chapter explores new instructional methods that add to the scope of L2 pragmatics teaching and research in a specific digitally mediated environment, the microblogging tool Twitter.

BACKGROUND

As Gonglewski and DuBravac (2006) highlighted, language instructors should view themselves as educators who embrace and promote contemporary and popular modes of expressing and interpreting meaning in various contexts and (electronic) media. For language learners, developing electronic literacy in an L2 may be a difficult task, but one necessary for taking advantage of the numerous opportunities to observe authentic language and autonomously practicing their linguistic abilities. Teaching toward multiliteracies enables language learners to become active members of different global learning communities and use a foreign language in new contemporary ways (Kasper, 2000). It is, therefore, not surprising that a rapidly grow-

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