

Use of Twitter for improving reading comprehension skills

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Abstract

Technology in educational field was implemented by the use of social networks such as Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, Flickr or Whatsapp, which have been used to improve different language skills (acquisition of second foreign language). The aim of this research is to foster reading comprehension skill through the use of Twitter in EFL (English as a foreign language) classroom. Fifty participants (N=50) were involved in this experimental research; they all were enrolled in the Reading and Writing I class. In addition, both quantitative and qualitative approaches were used in order to obtain and analyze the information gathered in the research field. Based on the results, it can be said that the students have improved reading comprehension skill, which was evident in the comments provided in Twitter. Apart from that they had the opportunity to share information and ideas among classmates in an informal learning environment, which allow them to act and use the language spontaneously. For this reason, it is highly recommended to use Twitter as a learning tool to be adapted to the acquisition of a second or foreign language.

Keywords: English foreign language, Learning environment, Reading comprehension, Reading skill, Twitter.

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Resumen

La tecnología en el campo educativo se implementó mediante el uso de redes sociales como Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, Flickr o Whatsapp, que se han utilizado para mejorar las diferentes habilidades lingüísticas. El objetivo de esta investigación es mejorar la comprensión lectora a través del uso de Twitter en el aula (inglés como lengua extranjera). Cincuenta estudiantes (N = 50) participaron en esta investigación experimental; todos formaban parte de la clase de Reading and Writing I y quienes fueron divididos en un grupo de control y experimental cada uno de 25 participantes. Además, se utilizaron enfoques tanto cuantitativos como cualitativos para obtener y analizar la información recolectada en la investigación de campo. Con base en los resultados, se puede decir que los estudiantes pudieron mejorar la capacidad de comprensión lectora, lo cual fue evidente en los comentarios emitidos en Twitter. Además de eso, tuvieron la oportunidad de compartir información e ideas entre compañeros de clase en un ambiente de aprendizaje informal, que les permite actuar y usar el lenguaje de forma espontánea. Por esta razón, se recomienda utilizar Twitter como herramienta de aprendizaje para la enseñanza del Inglés como segundo idioma o idioma extranjero.

Palabras clave: ambiente escolar, comprensión lectora, inglés como lengua extranjera, lectura, Twitter.

Introduction

The demands of the actual world in the education field refers to the use of technology inside classroom make that teachers look for new strategies to be applied in their classes in order to be aligned with the tools that students normally use. Social networks become a part of our daily lives so they have been implemented in the activities in the classrooms. In that way, considering that EFL students have problems in order to comprehend reading texts, it is considered that Twitter offers a wide range of texts that help students to practice and improve their reading skill.

Another issue that concerns in the educational field is the lack of students 'comprehension of lectures that is a problem that universities' students around the world have to face since learners are not able to identify main ideas, infer and analyze information. In that sense, the research aims at analyzing and determining the effectiveness of Twitter for improving reading comprehension in universities students in the South region of Ecuador.

Reading EFL skill and importance benefits and limitations

One of the varieties of definitions for readings given by Cambridge dictionary establishes it “ the skill or activity of getting information from books” which implies that reading is a process in which some strategies are applied in order to obtain and understand information. In similar way, Chastain (1988) reports that reading is a path that comprises significant knowledge and related language skills to achieve the interchange of information from one to another person. In fact, reading is a basic skill to be acquired for EFL students because they can understand the message that the writer attempts to convey. As reading is a receptive skill, it is indispensable for EFL learners to discover meanings from L2 input working on it actively and with effort (Saville-Troike, 2008). In addition, reading skill grants learners to achieve increased progress in all academic fields (Anderson, 1999).

Thus, considering the importance of reading skill, it is essential to indicate some benefits that this skill offers. As it is mentioned in an article by Bakken & Lund (2018) reading serves as instrument for expanding knowledge in specific or general topics. In addition, apart from increasing their cultural knowledge, can individuals develop their language competence too and feel confident, they also can gain motivation to carry on reading (Hedge, 2003). Furthermore, reading plays a significant role in the language acquisition since it cause a positive effect on students ‘vocabulary knowledge, spelling and writing. Above all, students can obtain from reading material good models for their own writing (Harmer, 2015). On the other hand, it could exist limitation with students who are trying to search material for practicing reading on the Internet due to the fact that information posted there might not be authentic (Rao, 2014).

Reading comprehension

In previous years, teachers employed traditional methods that oblige students to use techniques for short term memorization (Paul ,1990). However, nowadays the 21st century requires students to demonstrate their skills and abilities in the way of knowing and discussing different topics and in this sense critical point of view can be developed (Gokturk, 1997). Indeed, teachers try to apply different reading strategies within class to create or increase students ‘comprehension; for that reason, as Alyousef (2006) stated, it is necessary that teachers work with students from early ages selecting adequate material that inspires them to read and understand it. Within reading skill, comprehension is fundamental in order to know the understandability of a text; therefore, reading comprehension becomes an essential part inside of second language curriculum due to the fact that allows students to infer, analyze, synthesize and evaluate as mentioned by Facione (1992).

Reading strategies

Reading is one of the essential skill to succeed in all educational contexts and remains of paramount importance of creating assessments of general language ability. English learners must acquire two fundamental strategies in order to become efficient readers. First, the learners must master “bottom-up” strategy for processing separate letters, words, phrases or sequences of graphic symbols; second, they must become familiar with top-

down strategy that refers to comprehension. Apart from that the readers must develop appropriate content and in order to interpret effectively, it is necessary to receive background information and cultural experience.

Except of measuring the comprehension it is also important, to assess the strategies that readers use-or fail to use in order to achieve the last comprehension of the text. As a crucial part that must be considered is microskills and macroskills as a spectrum of possibilities for objectives in the reading assessment comprehension. By microskills is understood the following: discriminate among the distinctive graphemes and orthographic patterns, recognize a core of words and interpret word order patterns and their significance, grammatical word classes, systems rules and elliptical forms, particular meanings and cohesive devices in written discourse. On the other hand, macroskills refer to recognizing the rhetorical conventions of written discourse, communicative functions such as form and purpose, to inferring context, distinguishing between literal and implied meanings, to developing of scanning and skimming, detecting discourse markers, guessing the meaning of words and activating schemata for the interpretation of texts.(Brown, & Abeywickrama, 2004).

Types of Reading

Several types of reading help organize various assessment tasks. Under the term perceptive reading is understood reading tasks that involve attending to the components of larger stretches of discourse: letters, words, punctuation, and other graphemic symbols, where bottom-up processing is implied. There are different ways of how to apply assessments for this skill. The first one is reading aloud in which the test taker sees separate letters, words, and/or short sentences and reads them aloud one by one. This skill proves reading comprehension. Other assessment within this area is called written response, in which the same stimuli are presented, and the test-taker's task is to reproduce the probe in writing. Here the evaluation of test taker's response must be carefully treated. Multiple-Choice is another reading assessment, in which test takers choose one of four or five possible answers, however, other formats such as circle the answer, true/false, choose the letter and matching can be used. The last option can be Picture-Cued Items, where test takers are shown a picture along with the written text and are given one of a number of possible tasks to perform as stated by Estiyowatl (2013)

Another type of reading as mentioned previously is selective reading, whose design is based on formal aspects of the language (lexical, grammatical or discourse features). These can test reading ability while providing multiple-choice, that is considered as a practical aspect of reading knowledge of vocabulary and grammar. Another appropriate format for testing selective level of reading are matching tasks. Nevertheless, to assess linguistic competence in reading, editing is used as a test method. Additionally, picture-cued tasks can be equally used for examining ability at the selective level. The last part of selective reading is so called gap-filling tasks that requires to create sentence-completion that demands test-takers to read and then complete by writing.

Under the term of interactive reading is understood the combination of form- and meaning-focused objectives that implies more top-down process, the typical formats are charts, graphs or longer texts. One option can be cloze task that refers to ability to fill in gaps in an incomplete image (visual, auditory, or cognitive) and supply missing details. Very traditional way of testing this skill is to propose impromptu reading plus comprehension questions, which mostly refer to “Read a passage and answer some questions”. In this sense short-answer tasks and editing of longer texts. To look for a relevant information in a text scanning strategy is the appropriate one in this case, this one requires a quick identification of a relevant information. In order to test an overall global understanding of a text, ordering task can be proposed. Understanding of graphics and converting nonverbal input into comprehensible intakes tests linguistic ability to interpret, it also includes the interaction of understanding numbers that is later conveyed to others in an understandable way. This ability definitely implies a process of information transfer defined by Brown & Abeywickrama (2004).

Last strategy to be mentioned is extensive reading that involves long texts like journal articles, reports, essays, stories or books. This type of discourse focuses mostly on bottom-up strategy. To the category of extensive reading belong too skimming, that mainly determines gist or main ideas in a reading matter. The last two techniques are summarizing and responding that requires to write a summary of a text or ask a student to respond to a text. The last testing is note taking and/or outlining, both are focused on retaining information through highlighting key words or organizational outlines that refer to supporting ideas.

Although many possibilities for reading assessment such as understanding basic letter/word recognition to the retention of meaning of a wide range of linguistic symbols were illustrated, there is still much to be learnt about how to develop this reading skill and it is essential to go beyond the proposed tactics and come up with new methods and creative ways of assessing reading.

ICTs for reading skills

Information and communication technologies (ICTs) have had outstanding effect on all aspects of our lives, and education is not excluded. Computer technology and network now play a more prominent role in promoting language learning. The traditional teaching and learning methods, which dismiss the practice of communication and application skills, are considered to be obsolete. Particularly, scholars have proved that some digital tools have a great potential to develop students' performance in reading; students have access to a wide variety of texts and information in general that help them to build knowledge as they read (Molster, 2016).

As a matter of fact, there is a debate whether students require different skills for online reading from those used for paper reading. Despite the fact many scholars agree that online reading abilities are more complex than paper reading abilities, if technology is carefully integrated into the curriculum, students would feel more motivated to develop the target skills (Liu, 2016).

Motivation based on new learning technologies

According to Mohammed (2002), students feel really motivated when using computers in learning because they can work on real world experiences and hands-on tasks. Alexander and Fox (2011) suggest, based on their literacy review that “the keys to reading motivation for adolescents might be found in non-traditional or alternative texts processed in out-of-school settings”. In addition, there is evidence suggesting that a technology environment can encourage at-risk students to participate in literacy experiences and become independent readers and writers.

Two important factors that can influence reading engagement are attitudes towards reading and interest in reading. Attitudes influence the way in which readers involve themselves. In discussing interest, students’ interest relates to the use of effective learning strategies, to the level of attention and to the comprehension of reading materials (Leino, 2014). Therefore, Twitter as a Blended Learning Community enables the exchange of information, and it further provides a sense of belonging that motivates learners to imitate the group learning behaviors. In addition, Twitter is suitable for any level of English because in writing the messages, the students can chose a topic and grammatical structure fitting their level; this characteristic makes learners feel comfortable and not stressful about completing an activity (Borau, Ullrich, Feng, & Shen, 2009).

Twitter for EFL classroom

Micro-blogging is a new tendency that allows people to post short text updates online, normally less than 140-200 characters. Micro-blog users often share real time interaction using variety of devices, such as Twitter. Twitter was introduced in 2006 and nowadays, it is one of the most popular micro-blog networks. In Twitter, people basically answer a question: what is happening?. Through Twitter, people around the world can communicate with each other. People can easily comment, share and keep up with current news from all over the world. One of the most interesting facts about Twitter is the size limit; maximum of 140 characters. This feature enhances creativity that can be used in language learning as well. By tweeting, people do not only exchange information about their daily life but also share professional experiences. It has also been used to discuss particular topics and issues that is eventually able to collect millions of unique ideas.

Regarding its usefulness in teaching and learning of language, many studies have been made since Twitter appeared. For instances, Lee (2011) mentions that blogs help students to be more critic since they decide what, when and how much they want to publish. Specifically, second language students are able to develop their ability to plan, understand and regulate their own language learning. Similarly, Lomicka and Lord (2011) express that Twitter is a fun and interactive way for learning English in a collaborative community which can be created by the teachers.

As it has been investigated, Twitter has a positive impact on educational setting; it can engage learners in a meaningful learning environment due to the classroom dynamics are different, it also helps to develop students’ creativity in writing concise messages because of the limited number of characters, and students have great chances to interact with native speakers in a real context.

Methodology

In this study, the quantitative and qualitative approaches were applied to find out the frequency students of using Twitter by students; furthermore, it allows in a specific way to identify the improvement students developed while interacting through the use of this tool. This study was carried out in a local university of the South of Ecuador in which 50 learners whose age was around 19-25 years among males and females. These participants were enrolled in the Reading and Writing I subject that is part of the English career in on-site program.

The intervention involved some stages; in the first one, students were divided into two groups, control and experimental including 25 participants each of them. The control group followed the activities suggested in their textbook “North Start Reading and Writing I”; whereas, the experimental group worked on tasks aligned with the topics in the students book, however, those activities were accompanied with reading texts selected from Twitter. The next step was to apply to students a questionnaire based on their experiences and preferences in terms of technology. Apart from the survey observation sheet as another instrument was employed in order to provide reliable information about the use of Twitter from students ‘point of view. Finally, the data could be collected, analyzed and interpreted so that final result could be determined.

Results

This study revealed that the majority of students from the experimental group were motivated to read information regarding to the proposed topics, and even more after the intervention, it can be stated that they used Twitter for academic purposes, as it can be seen in figure 1. In addition, the frequency of using this tool has increased relatively according to the high interaction that students made with their comments for each unit. Results obtained confirmed that by using Twitter tool, students have become more critical due to the fact that reading sources included trendy and controversial topics. In fact, as stated Lee (2015) this material helps students to be more critical and deciding the type of information that they want to include.

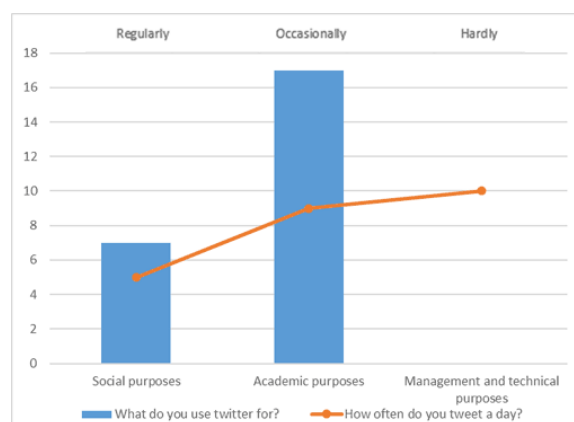


Figure 1. Purposes of using Twitter

In figure 2, it can be shown that students have a good perception of Twitter as an educational tool for developing reading skill since they can expand their acquisition of vocabulary as well as they make improvements in their writing tasks. As Harmer (2015) mentioned, reading is a good pattern for students to follow in their writing skill.

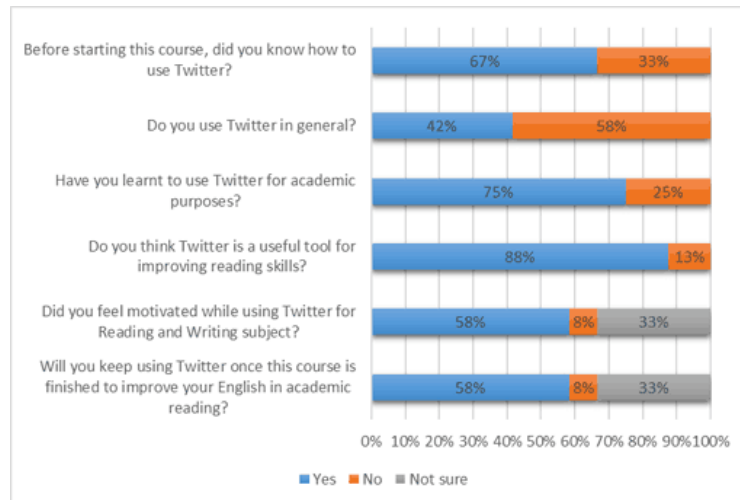


Figure 2. Students' reasons for using Twitter

Concerning students comfort, they declared that Twitter was a friendly platform in which it was possible to interact and discuss whatever, whenever and wherever in a collaborative community since this tool is fun and offers a pleasant environment (Lomicka & Lord, 2011).

Conclusions

Twitter as educational tool for reading, offers a great amount of texts that helps teachers to work in more effective way since Twitter offers trendy, catchy and more authentic material. In fact, students feel more engaged to interact among themselves in a more relaxing learning environment.

In addition, results proved that students' vocabulary increased considerably as they were exposed to great variety of information and sources posted in Twitter. Furthermore, students were able to show their reflective and critical thinking while working on different reading comprehension tasks that were more attractive in term of content.

Thanks to their comments posted on this tool and sharing experience it can be said that students have also improved their writing skill when reading different background information, paying more attention to orthography and punctuation and reviewing grammar structures as well as overall organization of texts.

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