Potential of Twitter in Post-reading Activities Among Community College Students in Malaysia

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Abstract

Since its introduction in 2006, many studies have been made on the use of Twitter as learning tool especially in language classrooms. These studies, however, tend to look at the use of Twitter as language learning tool in the school, college or universities and rarely in the community college environment. Although it is one of the higher education institutions in Malaysia, community colleges do have vast differences with other institutions in terms of students’ educational background and learning motivation, lecture duration and semester, mission and vision and lecturer expertise. Thus, this paper describes a survey study using a Fuzzy Delphi method to investigate the potentials of using Twitter for post-reading activities among Malaysian community college students. The main focus of this study was to get experts’ consensus on the future of Twitter and its usage in language learning in the future for community college students. Experts consisted of experienced community college English lecturers and curriculum developers and academic specialists from the Community College Department, Ministry of Higher Education. Findings indicated that low level of Twitter usage among lecturers and students make Twitter as a learning tool rather vague in the future. This article discusses the reasons behind the moderate level of Twitter usage and the direction for future research in implementing Twitter in the language learning classroom.

Keywords: Twitter; post-reading; community college; Fuzzy Delphi.

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1. Introduction

The use of Twitter for educational purposes has been of interest to many researchers and they have produced many studies showing positive correlation between Twitter and various aspects of education (Borau, Ullrich, Feng & Shen, 2009; Junco, Heibergert & Loken., 2010; Veletsianos, 2011). However, most of these studies are focusing more on the current state of technology and education and giving less focus to its future potential. There are even fewer studies that relate educational function of Twitter and how it can benefit community college students in developing their reading skills.

Due to the nature of the course and the emphasis on skills and training, English is given less attention by the community college students and it leads to poor proficiency especially reading skills. While one of the objectives of the community college is to create a knowledgeable community (k-community), reading fluently in the target language will definitely help to achieve the objective mentioned above. Thus, Twitter is seen as the most suitable learning tool for community college students to use the target language effectively, effortlessly even outside their classroom. Our main concern, however, is how long can Twitter potentially serve as a language learning tool? With the increased awareness and uses for other microblogging services such as Tumblr, Pownce and Jaiku and recently Edmodo (Holotescu & Grosseck, 2009), is the use of Twitter as the language learning tool for community college students still relevant for the next 10 years?

We begin by looking at a few studies showing the benefit of Twitter in education. Since its launch in July 2006, many studies have been conducted to understand the functionality of Twitter and its benefit to educators (Stevens, 2008) but there are few yet growing numbers of studies to investigate the relationship of Twitter and language learning situations (Lomicka & Lord, 2011). Several studies also show that not only students can benefit from educational usage of Twitter; scholars can also participate and use their social network for professional purposes. Veletsianos’s finding indicated seven themes of scholars’ Twitter practices and activities and one of the themes is “expanding learning opportunities beyond the confines of the classroom” (2011).

Compared to Facebook, another popular social networking site which is more popular and commonly used by college students, Twitter primary functions as microblogging platform and ongoing public dialogue has attracted educators to use it as part of their college courses (Antenos-Conforti, 2009, Ebner et al., 2010; Grosseck & Holotescu, 2009; Junco et al., 2011; Schroeder et al., 2010; Smith & Caruso, 2010). This is reinforced with the findings from Junco et al., (2011) research where a group of students who use Twitter showed higher semester GPA than a group who did not; while a study conducted by Kirschner and Karpinski (2010) showed that Facebook users having lower GPA. Dunlap and Lowenthal (2009a, 2009b) stated that Twitter also has instructional benefits which are “enhancing social presence, maintaining relationship, supporting learning, writing concisely and for an audience, addressing issue in a timely fashion, and connecting classmates and instructor”. With all the findings from the few studies above we can conclude that even though many studies have been done on the topic, still not much research exists on the potential of Twitter in the future. This research is significant because previous work has shown that positive attitudes are usually shown toward new technologies (Beauvois, 1998; Chen et al., 2004; Ducate & Lomicka, 2009; Ushida, 2005). We need to see the potential of Twitter in education and language learning as the novelty wears off and its survival with the emergence of new educational microblogging sites such as Edmodo.

Apart from these studies focusing on current technologies and the education scenario, most of the literature is usually directed to Twitter and its benefit to the communicative and cultural competence of the language (Borau et al., 2009). It would be interesting if there are many studies that show correlation between Twitter and how it can develop reading skills in a second language. Existing studies on community colleges also tend to investigate the current issues such as the most appropriate teaching method to teach certain courses and the effectiveness of the programs offered in providing and preparing student for employment (Hassan, 2011; Madar et al., 2009).
Since community colleges in Malaysia are relatively new compared to other countries and doing research is not necessary for its educators, it is considered an urgency to build a body of knowledge that can help improve the quality of this institution in the future.

By looking and examining potentials of Twitter in education; and how it can develop reading skills among community college students, educators can adapt and apply Twitter into their lesson if this paper can prove that Twitter does have potential in developing reading skills. Policy makers and curriculum developers in the Community College Department in the Ministry of Higher Education can encourage educators to use Twitter not only for their lessons, but among educators in all 80 branches of community colleges in Malaysia. This can help educators to share ideas, request assistance and offer suggestions and to connect and network among educators in similar or different fields of teaching. Administrators can plan and provide internet connection, computers or any technological equipment and staff to facilitate the implementation of Twitter in language courses at all community colleges.

1.1 Twitter in Education

In line with an effort to foster and produce more autonomous learners, computer-assisted language learning (CALL) is seen as the best way to help achieve this aim. Blogs, for example have been used widely in classrooms to provide diversity in language learning, depending on pedagogical purposes (Lee, 2011). Lee stated that by writing blogs, learners can decide what, how much and when they want to publish their work (2010). Students can also develop their “ability to plan, understand and regulate their own language learning” (Baggetun & Wasson, 2006; Ward, 2004, as cited in Lee, 2011). Microblogging however, is a service that allows users to post their thoughts, share pictures, videos or links but with limited characters and smaller file size. Oulasvirta et al. (2009, as cited in Veletsianos, 2011) defined microblog as a service that allows users to write updates by using either mobile devices or personal computers and publishing them on the Web. A few microblogging tools falling under the category of Web 2.0 such as Jaiku, MySay, Hictu, Edmodo exist but the most popular of these tools is Twitter. With the increasing number of smartphone users from all levels of society, from toddlers to senior citizens, it is not surprising if Twitter is seen as a new medium that can help provide diversity in language learning. What set Twitter apart from other microblogging tools or weblog is its features as part microblogging tool – part social networking tool that can enable users to access freely on the Web (Stevens, 2008 as cited in Bicen & Cavus, 2012). McFedries (2007) as well as Holotescu and Grosseck (2011) stated that microblog is different from weblog because of its social network structure feature. In short, Twitter is more interactive, allows user to be more creative with words (due to limited characters in a post), gives instant feedback, can be accessed easily and helps users to connect with people all around the world. It is not surprising that Twitter made its way into education and language learning, given that the number of tweets per week average around a billion (Smith, 2011). When an increasing number of language teachers and educators started implementing, assimilating and using Twitter as part of their teaching and learning, many studies have been done on the correlation of Twitter in language learning and education in many different aspects.

Research done by Lomicka and Lord (2011) proved that Twitter can help language learners form a collaborative community where they can learn, share and reflect. The sample consisting of thirteen students enrolled in an intermediate French course in a south eastern university in the United States and twelve native French speakers enrolled in an intermediate-high English conversation course in France shows that Twitter allows learners in both languages to develop a sense of community. They also learn a new language in a fun and interactive way.
A study conducted by Borau et al. (2009) to analyze the usefulness of microblogging (Twitter) in second language learning shows that Twitter can help second language learners to train in communicative and cultural competence. This is because the traditional language teaching method rarely gives the learner the chance to produce the target language actively and as a tool of communication. Junco et al. (2010, 2012) in his researches focused more on Twitter and student engagement. His research proved that Twitter, if using in educationally relevant ways, had a positive effect on student engagement, as well as having positive effects on students’ grades. Junco et al. also proved that to improve student collaboration, engagement and success, faculty has to be actively participating and integrate Twitter into the course.

Few researchers have tried to look Twitter and its benefit to the educators. Veletsianos (2011) indicated that higher education scholars participate and use Twitter for seven reasons. First, to share information, resources, and media related to their profession. Second, they use Twitter to share information about their classroom and students, followed by to request assistance and offer suggestions to others. Other reasons are to engage in social commentary, engage in digital identity and impression management and seek to network and make connections with others. Finally, higher education scholars use Twitter to highlight their participation in online networks other than Twitter such as YouTube and Facebook.

Bicen and Cavus (2012) summarized Twitter as a “part social networking – part microblogging tool, freely accessible on the Web”. In their research on Twitter usage habits of undergraduate students, they have found that the majority of students spent their time using Twitter to share quotes, photos, videos, music, news, IT news and magazine news while educational material were least frequently shared by students. This gives a new insight of Twitter use in a classroom and the move to produce autonomous learners. This is because educators might wonder whether students’ participation when Twitter in being used in the course is voluntary or because it is graded. This doubtful thought is being supported by a research done by Haytko and Parker (2012) where their research confirmed that students actually do not see any social networking sites; be it a Twitter or Facebook, as appropriate tools to be used in the university setting. Many students might create a new Twitter account for educational purposes if Twitter is part of their course requirement.

Elavsky, Mislan, and Elavsky (2011) in their study tried to see the effectiveness of Twitter in a different perspective; which is to explore the outcomes of Twitter usage in large-lecture hall. This is referring to the general courses where the students come with diverse backgrounds, perspectives and knowledge sets. The outcomes shows that Twitter usage in large-lecture hall is generally positive and can help improve students’ impressions, participation and enthusiasm.

1.2 Reading Stages

There are four language skills that are considered important in order for a learner to acquire a second language. Those skills are reading, writing, speaking and listening. Reading, however, is seen as the most important skill for a student to master (Carrell, 1998; Eskey, 1973, as cited in Mohd. Zin & Rafik-Galea, 2010). Teaching reading involves three stages; pre-reading, while reading and post-reading; each has its characteristics and benefits.

Post-reading stage is the last stage in teaching reading. The main purpose is to ensure learner’s comprehension and retention of the information of the text that they have already read. It is also to develop and clarify learners’ interpretation of the text and help them remember what they have created in their mind individually about the text. Post reading is done in many ways in a language classroom. Some are follow-up by teachers, discussion
among learners or doing a graphic organizer and guided reading and discussion. All these strategies can help learners develop their reading skills as well as giving them the needed time to practice in the target language. It is also helpful if the reading material is authentic and written by a native speaker. Guo’s (2012) study shows a strong relationship between extensive reading and vocabulary development. This means second language learners can learn better and faster if they have a certain amount of exposure to the target language and not only learning confined in the four walls of the classroom. This leads us to how Twitter can help second language learner learn the target language better.

Usually, a language teacher has limited teaching time in a classroom and can only rely on the students’ response as how they understand something they read earlier. Anxiety also hinders students from perform well in the reading classroom thus affecting their reading performance (Mohd. Zin & Rafik-Galea, 2010). Since post-reading is an important stage to ensure learners’ understanding of the topic learnt and a way to check their reading skills, due to students’ anxiety and limited teaching duration, many teachers choose to ignore this stage. Some teachers gave comprehension activities to achieve the objectives, but it is difficult for them to determine whether the answers are individually written or copied from each other.

By using Twitter where response is quick, communication is interactive and individuality can be seen by individual tweet, teachers can determine and see indirectly which one of their students already developed reading skills, understand the text studied in the classroom and develop their own meaning and perception of the text. There are of course, certain things that teacher should be cautious when using Twitter to help learners develop their reading skills. Teachers should encourage participation from all learners. For example, participation should be graded. Teacher can also fully-use Twitter applications such as hastag, retweet and favorite to make interaction about a reading text more interactive. This is parallel to Bromley’s study that develops the idea of the future of reading and writing. In his study, he proposed that pens, pencils and paper will soon be artifacts of the past, electronic reading and writing will be pervasive, collaborative and social events and lastly, speech will replace most writing.

2. Research Design

Community College is one of the four higher learning institutions for school leavers in Malaysia. The others are public universities, private universities and polytechnics. Contrary to popular beliefs, community college is not for school leavers who do not have outstanding academic achievement, but rather the main objective of community college is to create the lifelong learning environment in Malaysian society. To date, there are 80 branches of community colleges all around Malaysia; these are usually located in rural areas. The major difference between community colleges and all other higher learning institutions is its flexible study mode. Students can opt to study continuously for 20 months until they get the certificate (Sijil Kolej Komuniti or SKK) or study by module for about three to six months to get Sijil Modular Kebangsaan. The difference between the two certificates is that students who opt to do the latter can always complete a module for 3-6 months, continue or look for a job and continue a module again until they finished all 60 credits to get the SKK. They are also offered short courses which take less than month, sometimes a day to complete. As for entry requirement, no outstanding academic achievement or any academic certificate is necessary for acceptance.

Thus, given the variety of the duration of the courses and students’ background and learning motivation, teaching English is considered as a real challenge in community colleges. English lecturers found it difficult to maintain interest, relationship, and enthusiasm because of several factors such as students’ perception toward the language
itself, student motivation, constantly changing students and timetable and the emphasis given on the technical subjects.

3. Methodology

The aim of this study is to examine the possibility of using Twitter for post-reading activities to community college students in order to develop their reading skills. In other words, the purpose of this paper is to study the potentials of using Twitter for post-reading activities among community college students. Studying the potentials of Twitter in the future of language learning involves subjective value judgement and great debate; therefore this study employed the Fuzzy Delphi Method (FDM). FDM is a great method to use when a study needs an effective tool to gather data generated from opinion where these opinions are always imprecise and uncertain. By using FDM, subjective data can be transformed into quasi-objective quantitative data and can facilitate decision making of controversial issues (Tang & Wu, 2010). It is a combination of traditional Delphi Method and the fuzzy set theory. Chang et al. (2000, as cited in Tang & Wu, 2010) explains that FDM can “processes fuzziness in relation to forecast item and the information contents of respondents”. It also allows researchers to elucidate individual attributes of participants because fuzzy forecasts are utilized and preserved. It is not only a mean generated mechanically but an agreeable score based on the “acceptable value ranges” given by respondents.

This first stage of this study is to conduct interviews with several experts regarding teaching reading, Twitter and community colleges. Experts consist of active Twitter users, language experts from government schools and community colleges, curriculum developers from the Department of Community Colleges and Education and Information Technology experts. The rationale for selecting the experts was based on the assumption that they are experts who understand and active Twitter users themselves, experienced in language teaching, understand the potentials and barriers in the community college curriculum and have deep understanding of how to make Twitter or any electronic devices work in community colleges. The second stage of this study involved distributing questionnaires to 25 English lecturers at community college that have sound knowledge about their subject and have basic knowledge of Twitter. Some of them have a Twitter account, know the function but rarely used it while the others are considered as regular users (5-6 tweets a week). Questionnaires are either emailed, posted or conducted face-to-face.

4. Results

The main purpose of the interviews was to gather experts’ opinions on how Twitter can be potentially used in post-reading activities in English lessons at community colleges. It is also to determine lecturers’ attributes that can help achieve this motion and what are the state of facilities and technology needed for this to happen. Six main determinants were identified from the literature as well as experts’ answers. The determinants are the future of Twitter, the future of Twitter in the language learning classroom for community college students, the current facilities in the community college, the current technology used in the community college, English lecturers’ comprehension and attitude toward reading theory and English lecturers’ comprehension, attitude and expectation towards Twitter. Only 30 out of 47 variables of six determinants achieved the experts’ consensus. Measures percentage below 75% were crossed out. The final variables were then arranged according to percentage as shown in Table 1.
Table 1: Final variables from Fuzzy Delphi technique arranged according to percentage

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Minimum Value</th>
<th>Maximum Value</th>
<th>Most Reasonable Value</th>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Ranking</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td><strong>The Future of Twitter</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>Twitter will be more accessible with the increased use of smartphones.</td>
<td>9.20</td>
<td>17.20</td>
<td>13.20</td>
<td>13.20</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>Twitter will remain as the most popular social networking site for the next 20 years.</td>
<td>8.20</td>
<td>16.00</td>
<td>12.00</td>
<td>12.07</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td><strong>The Future of Twitter in the Language Learning Classroom for Community College Students.</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>Twitter will be the most popular social networking site among community college students.</td>
<td>7.20</td>
<td>14.80</td>
<td>10.90</td>
<td>10.97</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td><strong>The Current Facilities in the Community College</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>Community college should upgrade its internet and computer facilities regularly.</td>
<td>10.40</td>
<td>14.40</td>
<td>18.40</td>
<td>14.40</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>All community colleges are equipped with the internet connection.</td>
<td>9.40</td>
<td>13.40</td>
<td>16.50</td>
<td>13.10</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>All computer equipment is maintained regularly and in good condition.</td>
<td>8.10</td>
<td>16.00</td>
<td>12.00</td>
<td>12.03</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td><strong>The Current Technology Used in the Community College</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>All community college staff and lecturers like to implement the latest technology in their work.</td>
<td>9.20</td>
<td>17.00</td>
<td>13.00</td>
<td>13.07</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>All community college staff, lecturers and students are open to the introduction and use of technology for learning purposes.</td>
<td>9.10</td>
<td>17.00</td>
<td>13.00</td>
<td>13.03</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>All community college staff and lecturers do not have problem using technology for work purposes.</td>
<td>9.00</td>
<td>16.80</td>
<td>12.80</td>
<td>12.87</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>Technology is used extensively in all community college lectures.</td>
<td>8.80</td>
<td>16.80</td>
<td>12.80</td>
<td>12.80</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>The current technology used in the community college is sufficient for the development of community college in the future.</td>
<td>8.50</td>
<td>15.50</td>
<td>12.40</td>
<td>12.13</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>Technology is used extensively in all community college administration.</td>
<td>8.10</td>
<td>15.10</td>
<td>12.00</td>
<td>11.73</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td><strong>English Lecturers’ Comprehension and Attitude towards Reading Theory.</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>All English Lecturers agree that reading skills should be emphasized in English lessons at community college.</td>
<td>10.20</td>
<td>18.20</td>
<td>14.20</td>
<td>14.20</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>All English Lecturers should always look out for ways to improve the quality for their teaching.</td>
<td>10.20</td>
<td>18.20</td>
<td>14.20</td>
<td>14.20</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>All English Lecturers always look for new methods and ideas in teaching English to their students.</td>
<td>9.80</td>
<td>17.80</td>
<td>13.80</td>
<td>13.80</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>All English Lecturers fully understand the concept of pre-reading, while reading and post-reading.</td>
<td>9.70</td>
<td>17.60</td>
<td>13.60</td>
<td>13.63</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>All English Lecturers do not have problem in preparing and giving post-reading activities to students.</td>
<td>9.50</td>
<td>17.40</td>
<td>13.40</td>
<td>13.43</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5. Discussion

According to the arranged results, summarized in Table 1 in the Twitter and Language Learning determinant, Twitter will be more accessible with the increased users of smartphones. The experts agreed 100% about the usage of Twitter among community college students using smartphones. Nowadays, at this time almost all teens use smartphones in their daily lives. This is a trend for teenagers. They are willing to buy inexpensive smartphones. So, Twitter usage will be easy with smartphones. Moreover, the government had given a 200 ringgit rebate for teens who want to buy a smart phone (beritasemasa.com., Sept 29). The second highest ranking is Twitter will remain as the most popular social networking site for the next 20 years. The experts agreed 95% about this matter because twitter is easily handled by students with smartphones and unlike Facebook where we need a laptop to access it. The other two items have not reached consensus among experts. The items are there will be no social networking sites that can replace Twitter for the next 20 years and Twitter will remain popular because it is easy to set up a Twitter account and use all its features. We predict that most probably, Twitter will be considered outdated like Friendster nowadays. Most of the experts did not master in Twitter features.

6. Conclusion

Given the nature of Twitter and the current practices in community colleges, it is fair to say that there is still a long way for Twitter to be potentially used in not only post-reading activities but for all academic activities in Malaysian Community Colleges. While almost all English lecturers at the community college are armed with the language knowledge, skills and experience, many still not sure and certain how Twitter can be best used in facilitating language lessons. Not many of them are fans of Twitter, thus making it difficult for Twitter to get its way into the language classrooms. Current technology and facilities are also one of the issues for Twitter to be
taken seriously as a language learning tool. Since community college students mostly are part-timers and live in rural areas, the number of students who can afford a smartphone and the mobile plan is also questionable. The point of using Twitter is students can learn anywhere even if they are not in the community college area, but while the internet connection at the college is what we can categorize as mediocre, the objectives are hard to achieve if students can only have access if they are within the community college grounds.

Twitter has always been overshadowed by Facebook and it is only a matter of time for a new social networking site to replace Facebook in a few years’ time. If by promoting Twitter today to be used in community college results in lukewarm results, it is better for curriculum developers to look for and try a better, newer social networking site to be developed as part of the requirement of the English course. This way, lecturers and students can learn and explore a new technology together. As such, a final recommendation is to suggest for English lecturers at community colleges to embrace the current and new social networking site and try to look for the best way to use it in the classroom since it is easier than changing the modular study mode.

Given the exploratory nature of this study, the main challenge is to find English experts in community colleges who are active users of Twitter. Further study is required to see the acceptance of new technology among English lecturers and community college students to determine how best to integrate any latest technology or Web 2.0 tools in a language lesson.

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