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Microblogging And Blended Learning: Peer Response In Tertiary Education

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Abstract

The traditional classroom paradigm has been lately experiencing innovative changes with the advent of new technologies. This paper reports on the results of an exploratory study that puts into practice a blended learning approach in a university English course which favoured face-to-face as well as online meetings. Within this learning paradigm, the objective of this treatment was to analyse how the use of Twitter, a microblogging tool could help to increase students' confidence in English. This would imply a novelty in the field of language learning through computers, as it incorporated social networking to an explicit structured vocabulary task of ESL learning, which allowed peer revision of tweets and feedback from the instructor. Results showed that students largely preferred to recast rather than to carry out metalinguistic prompts as a feedback. Conclusions suggested that this blended learning approach contributed to internalize students' own target form errors through corrections to and from their peers. Using Twitter in the language class was an informal, easier and less intimidating way of starting to use new vocabulary in the target language.

1. Introduction

Since new technologies like the television, the computer or smartphones, among others, were not originally designed for education, the issue of the appropriate use of new technologies for learning has been a crucial point of

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departure in many studies in the field. As Zhao (1996) contended in the early days of this research field, the successful use of technologies in education depended basically on a clear understanding of the technology and on the achievement of a set of well-defined objectives based on a sound learning theory. In this treatment, we applied blended learning, that is, a pedagogical approach that combines face-to-face meetings as well as online meetings (Borau et al., 2009). Likewise, the element that was blended within the face-to-face component was students' participation on Twitter, a microblogging tool which allows messages of up to 140 characters, 30 words approximately, favouring slightly longer sentences than the average English sentence (Hattem, 2012). In language teaching, this social media platform has been applied in recent studies to encourage participation, engagement, reflective thinking as well as collaborative writing skills, following Luo and Gao (2012). Studies have concluded that writing short messages may be an easier and less intimidating way of starting to write in the target language, as Ruipérez García et al. (2011) observed. However, despite this recent interest in Twitter, the research on the application of Twitter to language learning is still today in an initial phase (Hattem, 2012).

The main purpose of this treatment was to develop blended learning activities on Twitter to enhance vocabulary learning. In this concern, during the last decades, much attention of ESL has been devoted to the role of vocabulary in reading, listening, speaking and writing, and to vocabulary acquisition and learning, since not knowing the right words is often the source of many mistakes in the target language (Fowler, 1987). As Hinkel (2006) contends, the techniques for teaching vocabulary have been broadly examined during the last decades, providing useful information for learners, teachers, and coursebook and curriculum designers (Folse, 2006). Specifically, researchers have devoted a great deal of scholarly attention to explicit vocabulary teaching against incidental learning, since the latter shows poor figures in vocabulary retention (Folse, 2006).

Having these premises as a point of departure, the treatment outlined in this article tried to contribute to the educational implications of the field of Computer-mediated Communication (CMC). The paper reports on how a blended learning approach by means of a microblogging tool could help increase students' confidence in using vocabulary appropriately. The treatment used in the study aimed at measuring the effectiveness of the tool in terms of specialized vocabulary expansion by analysing peer response on the language used in tweets.

2. Peer Response

Peer response is a pedagogical approach in which students provide feedback on their classmates' written drafts. Although peer response approaches have been used in traditional writing courses over a few decades, their implementation in blended learning courses is new. Online peer feedback is becoming nowadays increasingly popular to foster opportunities for language practice and to enhance students' active role in collaborative learning. Motivation, participation and collaboration are, among others, the benefits observed by online peer feedback approaches (Warschauer, 2002). As far as language improvement is concerned, Hattem (2012) claimed that correcting feedback in a CMC environment may favour the noticing of one's errors in the target language. In this concern, researchers agree upon the necessary condition of noticing for L2 acquisition, since "what learners notice in input is what becomes intake for learning" (Schmidt, 1995: 20).

3. Aim of the Study and Research Question

The treatment, carried out during the course 2012-2013, involved an ambitious study on the incorporation of Web 2.0 applications into tertiary education and vocabulary learning and acquisition. Yet, in this written-up version of our paper presented in WCES'06, we will only comment upon one the most relevant aspects of the study, that of peer revision and peer feedback. Following Sauro's (2009) study on corrective feedback on grammatical errors (see Table 1), our students were asked to notice their peers' errors on vocabulary use and respond to them either recasting, that is, reformulating the sentence using the adequate word, or by means of a metalinguistic prompt.

Table 1. Sauro's (2009: 104) proposed types of responses to grammatical errors.

Responses to Errors	Operationalization of Response to Target Form Error	Example
Recast	Reformulation of the full sentence containing the error.	S: In Sweden the global warming is a problem. A: In Sweden global warming is a problem.
Metalinguistic Prompt	A scripted meta statement reminding the student to use the zero article.	S: In Sweden the global warming is a problem. A: Be sure to use the zero article.

The research question posed was the following: will peer response help students' noticing of errors in the target form?

4. Methodology

The research question was addressed by observing which type of corrective feedback, recasting or by means of a metalinguistic prompt, was, in fact, provided to the students' errors in Twitter. We compared the noticing of errors in two groups: the control and treatment group. A total of 53 students enrolled in these two groups: 25 in the control group and 28 in the treatment group. Participants of both groups were registered in a course of English B2 at university. Their age ranged from 20 to 27 years old. The distribution of male and female students was equivalent. Students were actively involved in producing input, output and feedback to other classmates. The treatment compared the use of peer response in Twitter by two groups of similar academic profiles but different preparation to the task:

• Control group:
.- English B2 students that did not receive previous indications on peer feedback as a method of response to errors. In this case, each student peer reviewed the tweets of a classmate following their own criteria.

• Treatment group:
.- English B2 learners who received focused corrective feedback on the task. Indications on how to respond to errors, either by recasting or reformulating the sentence, were provided in a dedicated session. Students could choose one of these methods in their feedback.

In both groups, the exercise finished with the teacher's revision of the final corrections. An in-class feedback session with the most relevant problems was also carried out as a concluding debriefing session.

5. Results

5.1. Control group:

In the first group of students, with no indications provided to peer review tweets, most students fail to spot mistakes and, therefore, their correcting feedback consisted basically in approving their partners' production. Examples of this positive feedback were: "it's OK, don't worry about mistakes", "I think it's all ok". However, in spite of this frequent positive feedback, in most cases there were mistakes, which students might have been unable to notice because of the following reasons:

- They were low proficiency learners unable to detect mistakes because of their insufficient linguistic knowledge of the target form.

- The student's partner was a high proficiency learner. The reviewer felt that his/her partner would never make mistakes.
- Some students failed to seriously dedicate time and effort to the revision process. They did not provide feedback but merely commented on their partner's texts, as, for example: "I completely agree with you!", "With effort it´s easier to achieve anything you want".

In some cases, however, the participant provided accurate feedback to his/her partner's messages, such as in example 1[†], which includes a tweet and its correction:

Lluís @lluiss. 18 Dec
Miguel Indurain was the best tour cycling until Amstrong wont a lot "Tour de France"
Francisco P. @F. 18 Dec
@lluiss. **Miguel Indurain was the best tour cyclist until Armstrong began to win a lot "Tour de France"**

As for the practice of language skills, in most cases, students succeeded in incorporating the new vocabulary to their tweets. Thus, new words such as "self-control", "position", "building site", and new idioms such as "take your eye off the ball", were successfully incorporated in the tweets. Regarding spelling, some problems were occasionally found with, for instance, the inclusion of "hability" instead of "ability" (since in Spanish, *habilidad* has an initial "h"). On balance, in this control group, the analysis of the students' messages showed that they frequently responded to their peers by simply agreeing to their partners' sentences. Likewise, they often had problems detecting their partners' errors. As for linguistic problems, most participants did not really have problems in incorporating the new vocabulary learned in each unit. In general, the majority of the problems were concerned with article usage, third person singular verbs, and, especially, with the inclusion of an "s" for plural in adjectives.

5.2. Treatment Group:

In this second group, in which students were indicated to respond to their partners' errors by recasting or by means of metalinguistic prompts, results showed that some participants followed the patterns observed in the control group, that is, those students highly proficient were never corrected but were shown sympathy. Nevertheless, as a novelty, in this group recasting was introduced since students valued the rewarding learning effect of noticing. In Example 2, we can observe this type of response to errors:

FranL. @FranL. 20 Oct
@SergioD. I like using the car to go to most of places although I hate be looking for parking many time
SergioD.@SergioD. Oct Nov
@FranL **I think that it is "many places" and "much time"**

A quantitative study of the responses to target form errors showed that almost all of these responses consisted in reformulating the part of the sentence with mistakes. Only one person commented upon the fact that an "s" was needed for third person singular verbs, providing feedback by means of a metalinguistic prompt. Regarding the linguistic problems arisen in this exercise, most students were able to identify the very few problems with vocabulary, although not many students could spot the incorrect use of some false friends in Spanish/English, such as "prove" instead of "try" to express intention.

Difficulties in noticing errors commonly appeared when article usage was involved, such as in Example 3:

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[†] Although students agreed upon showing their tweets in this article, names and addresses have been changed in order to protect the authors' privacy.

Sergio M. @SergioM. 20 Oct
I hate going on bus becouse it is very slow and it is a lot of expensive, tram and subway are more cheaper.
Dani E.@DaniE. 20 Oct
@DaniE. **I hate going on bus because it's very slow and it's very expensive. Tram and subway are cheaper**

It is also worth noticing that this last example is significantly interesting since it is one of the rare cases of recasting the whole tweet. Most of the feedback was carried out correctly although, despite previous recent instruction on the grammar topic, the student overlooked noticing errors in article usage to make generic reference.

Finally, another interesting feature drawn from the treatment was that, since Twitter does not incorporate a spelling checker, there were some spelling mistakes that would be improbable in texts written with other word processing programs, such as *Word*. Besides, it was hard to show corrections because crossing out a word or underlining it is not available; the only possible option is using capital letters to emphasize, like example 4 exemplifies:

Raúl F. @RaúlF. 17 Dec
This year Rafa will be again the number one in the ATP rankings. In conclusion Nadal is an inspiration for young tennis player.
Dani P. @DaniP 17 Dec
@RaulF **playerS**

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4. Discussion and Conclusions

A comparison of the peer responses provided in the control and experimental groups showed that, with instruction on corrective feedback, students seriously dedicated more time and effort to the revision process. On the other hand, the analysis of the feedback provided showed that recasting was the preferred type of response in the treatment group. Nevertheless, in general, the results drawn from this study put forward that students often failed to provide accurate corrective feedback on their classmates' tweets in both groups. Most participants wanted feedback from their teacher, and that was one of the main reasons they had for microblogging, as in the study by Hattem (2012). Notwithstanding this, peer revision was useful since students had to concentrate their efforts on the other students' errors and "internalize" their own errors through the corrections of their peers, as the case study carried out by Ruipérez García et al. (2011). Moreover, whole online visibility generally forced users to pay much more attention to both their sentences and corrections. The results evidenced that our students didn't really have problems regarding the use of new vocabulary but they recurrently had problems in grammar, especially in the use of tenses, prepositions, and article usage to express generic reference. Relatedly, it is interesting to point out that, as Sauro (2009) suggested, written interaction, such as that afforded by Twitter in our case, may increase the visual saliency of linguistic forms in comparison to face-to-face interactions. Thus, linguistic forms may be easily noticed in these written texts, which would help learners to confirm their hypotheses about the target language. The absence of time constrains to produce texts in this asynchronous tool may also have promoted noticing and production of difficult L2 forms (Sauro, 2009). Besides, in contrast to conversation which is ephemeral, written interactions on Twitter afford an "enduring visual record of the exchange" (Sauro, 2009: 101) allowing better noticing and revision and reuse of forms in previous interactions. In this treatment on Twitter, feedback was, to some extent, determined by the technology used. In other words, since Twitter does not allow certain writing facilities, corrections had to be highlighted by means of capital letters. Moreover, the lack of a spelling checker may have led to many more spelling errors than in conventional computer texts written with word processors. Consequently, in this case, as Herring (2011: 341) suggests "… the properties of the media do influence some aspects of language use". Finally, we would like to put forward that this task was a good example of a blended learning approach, since part of the activity was developed in class while another was developed online at the students' own pace. It is hoped that the community of learners piloted through this project can provide some light for explorations in the near future.

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