

DEVELOPING WRITING SKILLS WITH “TWITTER”

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Abstract. The article is devoted to developing students' writing skills with the Internet service “Twitter”. The authors of this article: a) describe “Twitter”, b) determine its didactic properties and appropriate methods facilities c) identify a list of writing skills that can be developed by “Twitter”, d) work out a step-by-step algorithm of students' writing skills development based on “Twitter”.

Keywords: Information and Communication Technologies; IT in education; “Twitter”; writing skills.

The present stage of Russian education development in general and the methods of teaching foreign languages in particular is characterized by the process of implementing innovation in education [1-4]. One of such types of innovation is informatization in language education that should be understood as “a set of measures to provide the whole process of learning a foreign language and culture with methodology, technologies for development of new training and teaching materials, principles of new information and communication technologies in education, training and retraining of teachers able to make an extensive use of the potential of information technology in practice under health-saving conditions” [5: 4]. The analysis of a number of papers of Russian and foreign researchers and practitioners shows that the level of integration of modern Internet technologies in the process of learning a foreign language is increasing year by year. So, if in the beginning of the 2000s e-mail was used to communicate with native bearers of language and culture [6], as well as Internet training resources for search and retrieval of information on the Internet [7], at present there is a tendency of introducing the methods of oral skills development with blog-technology [8], Wikis [9, 10], podcasts [11, 12], different types of linguistic corpus [13, 14], and mobile technologies [15, 16].

“Twitter” is one of the modern and advanced network services that provides certain possibilities for the development of writing skills [17]. Twitter enables users to communicate with each other with short, not more than 140-character text messages, called “tweets”. Every user registered on Twitter web page (fig. 1) can go to their page (fig. 2) and post the tweet accessible for every user. In its turn they can view the messages posted by oth-

er users. To navigate easily, Twitter has such tools as “Search”, “Following” and “Followers”.

“Search” tool helps users to find any information in Twitter by a required keyword (fig. 3). The “Following” tool allows each user to create a list of other users (“friends”), whose messages he / she reads. In this case, as soon as one of the friends posts a tweet on his / her page, this message instantly appears on this page. Thus, being online, each user receives information (as it becomes available) about what is happening in hi / hers friends' lives.

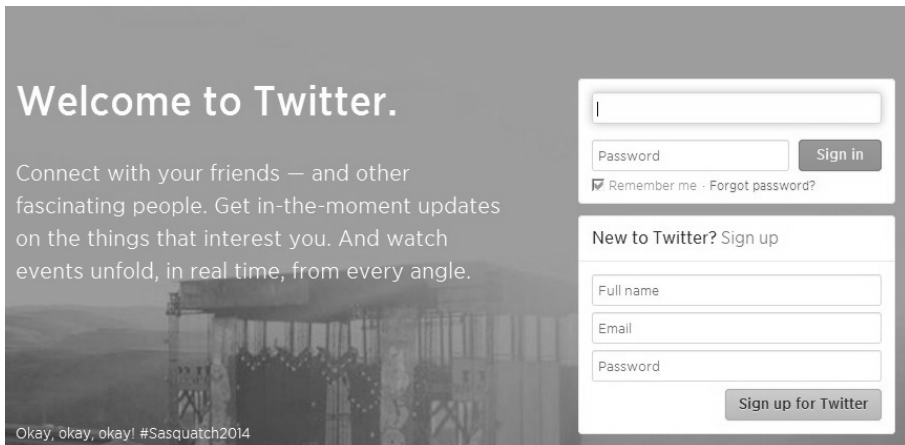


Fig. 1. Main Twitter page



Fig. 2. User's Twitter page



Fig. 3. Search for information in Twitter by keyword "Animal extinction"

The "Followers" tool has another function. Each user of Twitter may have friends who have subscribed to his / her updates. When posting the tweet, the message will appear in the author's profile and in the subscribers' news.

"Twitter" has the function of limiting access to reading tweets that allows restricting the amount of people to communicate with. In "Twitter" each user can create his / her own personal zone by posting an avatar (picture) and some information about himself (fig. 2).

No doubt, this service was originally created for communication between people for the purpose of a brief exchange of information - acquisition and dissemination of information on key aspects of life and activities of an individual. As an example, let's remember that only due to posting some tweets by one of the Russian governors our country in real time found out what happened and what issues were raised by the President at the meeting of the State Council. Reports on national television, showing that the speed of information transmission via "Twitter", can get ahead of the mainstream media, instantly attracted the attention of young and active users of new ICTs to this Internet service.

Thus, thanks to its technological potential and increasing popularity among the young people, "Twitter" can be used as a tool for learning a foreign language, and, in particular, the development of students' writing skills.

If we are to consider the methodological potential of "Twitter" in the development of writing skills, it would be appropriate to begin with the identification of the didactic properties and methodological functions of the service [3, 9, 17, 18], since the appropriate methods of teaching will be designed exactly on their basis. These didactic properties of "Twitter" are: brevity, publicity, linearity, hyper-textual structure, multimedia basis, issue-related classification of messages, and availability of multi-functional applications (table 1).

Table 1

Didactic properties and methodological functions of Twitter

Didactic properties of Twitter	Description of methodological functions of Twitter in learning a foreign language
Brevity	Twitter users can exchange 140-characters messages. The limitation of the number of characters can serve as an incentive for careful thought of the message content, its stylistic, spelling and punctuation design and as a stimulation for developing the abilities to summarize their thoughts (summary, abstract)
Publicity	The content of a particular tweet may be available to any user of "Twitter" or each user can restrict the amount of subscribers. Anyway, this feature allows you to organize network communication between those who study a foreign language at extracurricular time
Linearity	The messages on the user's page or on the news feed are posted in chronological order. Twitter does not allow making changes and additions in the previously published messages. They can only be removed. This property can be used, firstly, in organizing a network discussion, and secondly, it should be considered while developing such methods of teaching writing skills in which equal consideration will be given both to a group work (several students work at one project via "Twitter") and individual work (each student will have a separate part of an overall project)
Hyper-textual structure	In Twitter there is a special hierarchical relationship between pieces of information. It, firstly, provides quick access at any time to authentic learning resources, programs; secondly, it creates additional opportunities for free navigation on a certain Twitter page, easy transition from one section to another. Besides, it's easy to go to the additional Internet resources on the required subject. This feature will allow participants of Twitter learning to do a hyperlink to Twitter pages or other users' blogs. All this will be very productive in developing the ability to write synopses and reviews (on books, movies, music, exhibitions, etc.), reports. Such structure of Twitter promotes the enrichment of students' linguistic and socio-cultural practices
Multimedia based information	In Twitter users can post not only text messages, but links to audio, video and photos. This will enrich greatly students' language and cultural experience. Moreover, it will help them to find more information on the required subject

Didactic properties of Twitter	Description of methodological functions of Twitter in learning a foreign language
Issue-related classification of messages	Highlighted keywords (hash-tags) allow us to classify thematically all messages posted by users. This form of organizing your messages helps any user to find by the keyword the like-minded people with messages on a specific issue. This feature allows students to join affinity groups, to determine their own social environment and inspires a sense of involvement into the global educational processes in general. In addition, it will help students to search and select the information they need for their project
Multi-functional applications	A large number of applications and services in "Twitter" provide the opportunities for using new methods of research: creation of new structures for organizing and classifying data (sources) on the Internet; new forms of query and retrieval in the network. Thus, "Twitter" expands students' cognitive capabilities, contributes to the development of communicative and cognitive skills

A list of writing skills developed on the basis of "Twitter"

Didactic properties and methodical functions of "Twitter" allow developing a number of students' writing skills. The analysis of the requirements for the level of foreign language communicative competence in the stages of learning [17, 19] allowed us to distinguish the following range of writing skills:

- filling in a questionnaire;
- asking about the news and report on it;
- talking about some facts / events of their life;
- describing plans for the future;
- expressing in writing some information about themselves in the form adopted in the country / countries of the target language;
- jotting down the main content of the lectures, movies;
- making up abstracts or plans;
- writing down short essays (descriptive, narrative, argumentative, contrast-comparative);
- writing synopses and reviews (films, books, etc.).

Considering the range of skills being developed on the basis of "Twitter", it should be specially emphasized that some of the skills can be developed in the students' individual work, for example, the ability to fill out the forms or jot down the content of a lecture. Other writing skills can be developed only in the students' extracurricular group work, where each of the participants is only responsible for his / her own piece of a single written work. For example, at the first glance, it is difficult to imagine how you can develop the ability to write different types of essays with "Twitter". However, if we set writing an argumentative essay as a goal of Twitter project and distribute the tasks among the learners (the first student is to write and post on his page on "Twitter" first argument "for", the second -

the second argument "for", the third - the argument "against"... the fifth - the introduction, and then the conclusion). Thus, the technological features, didactic properties and methodical functions of "Twitter" allow to organize independent educational activity of the students and to develop certain writing skills.

Algorithm for developing writing skills with "Twitter"

Depending on the interests, needs, and also on the level of foreign language communicative competence and students' competence in the use of ICT it's possible to work out several methods for developing writing skills with "Twitter". In this article, we propose an algorithm which consists of four stages and 16 steps (table 2).

Table 2

Algorithm for developing writing skills with "Twitter"

Step	Teacher's activities	Students' activities
Organizational stage		
1. What is "Twitter"?	Tells the students about service "Twitter" in general, its structure, its opportunities and tools, main principles of Twitter's work	Ask organizational questions, read an article by K. Thompson "Brave New World of Digital Intimacy", 2008; watch video "Twitter in plain English", 2008
2. Evaluation criteria	Tells the students about the evaluation criteria, main principles of evaluating their work at Twitter-projects	Ask explanatory questions
3. Information security matters	Discusses with the students the problems of information security and how to observe it while working at Twitter-project	Discuss with the teacher the problems of information security and how to observe it while working at Twitter-project
4. What should students do?	Shows the students the algorithm for working with Twitter	Ask organizational questions
Technical stage		
5. Sign up for Twitter	Shows how to sign up for Twitter, creates his / her own account	Sign up for Twitter
6. View of the rules of posting messages	Shows an example of posting messages on Twitter page	Publish test messages
7. Specification of topics for Twitter-projects	Specifies a list of topics for learning	Make suggestions about the topics they would like to discuss via Twitter
8. Division of students into groups	-	Divide into groups of 3-4 students
Procedural stage		
9. Students' introduction on Twitter	Monitors students' work, helps in case of trouble	Introduce themselves on Twitter (post a photo, specify their age, country, place of study, hobbies, etc.)

Step	Teacher's activities	Students' activities
10. Searching and collecting information for Twitter project		choose a theme of their papers; collect pertinent information, analyze the data they got.
11. Determination of the final theme for Twitter-project		on the basis of the previous work determine the problems for discussion
12. Creating Twitter-document	Monitors students' work; captures the controversial and contradictory things for later resolution	solve a definite educational task, consistently create their own Twitter document
13. The presentation of Twitter-document	Monitors the presentation of students' projects	Present their Twitter-projects
Final stage		
14. Teacher's assessment of student's activity	Evaluates students' work on the basis of the identified criteria	
15. Students' self-assessment of their participation in the Twitter-project	Looks at the results of students' self-assessment and analyses them	Evaluate their participation in Twitter-project, tell about the results of studying with Twitter, about some difficulties they met during their work, summarize the content of the most important, useful and interesting lesson, from their point of view
16. Discussion on the issues of information security	Discusses with the students some issues concerning information security while working at Twitter-project	Discuss with the teacher some issues concerning information security while working at Twitter-project

After a detailed description of a learning algorithm we would like to draw your attention to certain issues affecting the efficiency of the proposed methodology. Firstly, we, not by chance, emphasized two stages in the preparatory phase of the work: organizational and technical. Despite their computer literacy in general, students may have a different level of ICT competence [3, 11, 20]. Therefore, after the students have become familiar with the purpose of the project and have a specific task, they need to sign up for Twitter all together at the first lesson to create an account and post a test message. It will help to remove a lot of technical difficulties related to extracurricular work on the service. Secondly, in order to avoid causing students moral and material damage during their participation in Twitter-project some time should be given to discuss the issues of information security [21]. Thirdly, during the students' extracurricular work the teacher's role is to conduct an independent network monitoring of students' self-learning activities. Besides, we insist on including in the learning algorithm the step dedicated to students' reflection on their learning activities. Developing the skills of self-reflection will help students to adequately assess their successes and

failures, in the future these skills will allow them to increase the efficiency of participation in such projects [14, 22].

As an example of functioning of this algorithm, we present one of the written works on the topic "Water Pollution" performed by the graduates via service "Twitter". At first, the students sketched the main theses of their work:

@wpol Care for water pollution exploded in the 1980s

@wpol oil is just one of many pollutants that people dump into the water every year.

@wpol The problem of ocean pollution affects every nation around the world

@wpol While many countries have now banned such behavior, it continues to go on today.

@wpol millions of people live along coastlines and near rivers, it means that these bodies of water are likely candidates for destructive pollution.

@wpol It is hard to know now what our oceans will look like in the future.

Then, these theses were expanded into sentences and paragraphs. As a result, they got a coherent text.

Attention for water pollution exploded in the 1980s. The oil spill of the Exxon Valdez showed many around the world just how horrible the effects of water pollution could be.

However, even the Exxon Valdez spill barely touched the surface of the problem of water pollution. Oil is just one of many pollutants that people dump into the water every year.

Every year, 14 billion pounds of sewage, sludge, and garbage are dumped into the world's oceans. 19 trillion gallons of waste also enter the water annually.

The problem of ocean pollution affects every nation around the world. This is especially true because water is able to transport pollution from one location to another.

For many years, chemicals were dumped into bodies of water without concern. While many countries have now banned such behavior, it continues to go on today.

As the world has industrialized and its population has grown, the problem of water pollution has intensified. The simple fact that millions of people live along coastlines and near rivers means that these bodies of water are likely candidates for heavy and destructive pollution.

It is hard to know now what our oceans will look like in the future. Just how damaged they will be by pollution is uncertain.

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