

# Twitter and Microblogging for Language Learning

a guide for teachers



## How to use Twitter and Microblogging in Language Lessons

Microblogging is an unusual form of expressing oneself, yet it is rapidly becoming a mainstream tool. Not only does its popularity make it relevant to language learners, its conversational and concise style offers opportunities to practice specific language skills.

### What is it? And how is it normally used?



Twitter is a microblogging tool. It combines features of SMS text messages and blogs. It allows users to send very short messages (known as "tweets") to each other that are also readable by the rest of the web (unless specifically made private as a Direct Message). Since the conversations are public, there can be a comfortable flow of text between various users, assuming that they all are following each other. Following is the twitter equivalent of subscribing to someone's blog. It is not necessarily a reciprocal arrangement: just because I follow you (ie subscribe to your tweets), doesn't mean that you are following me. In many ways, twitter is like a discussion forum, but the messages are too short to have titles (although they can have

tags) and so there is not the same sense of threads (according to topic) that there is with a discussion board. It is possible, however, to specify an intended recipient, which helps others follow the conversations. Tweets can be both read and written using the twitter.com website, a computer based client (such as TweetDeck, which is the equivalent of Microsoft Outlook for tweets) or a mobile phone (using SMS). Twitter conversations have a reputation for being fast moving and very much about the current moment (what we are doing or what we are thinking about right now). It can be thought of as an online water cooler where people talk about everyday topics.

### Why would we be interested?

- **Relevance:** many students already use Twitter in their own language and so may well be interested in using it in their target language. It has become a part of social, business and academic discussions and it has already entered mainstream communication.
- **Quick:** the conciseness of twitter writing means that it is quick to do. So it is easy to add to other learning activities, be it in the classroom or for homework.
- **Distinct style:** the brevity of twitter (each message is limited to 140 characters) means that the writing has a different style from other online writing (eg emails and blog posts). Although approximately the same length of an SMS message, the tweet has a different style; abbreviations such as "gr8" for "great" are not generally used in microblogging.
- **Conversational:** using Twitter is a chatty way to communicate and mimics the quick succession of comments in a normal conversation.

### How can we use it for language learning?

Twitter can be used for stand alone activities or it can easily be combined with other classroom or homework tasks. It is a way to keep students in contact, to emphasize fluency in communication and to focus on conciseness and accuracy.



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- I. **Following Conversations:** students can follow public conversations regardless of whether they even have their own twitter account. This is because Tweets (each comment in Twitter) are usually publically viewable (just as blogs are).
- II. **Following Others:** students can 'follow' (ie subscribe) to the twitter accounts of mainstream media (eg the UK's Channel 4 News: <http://twitter.com/jonsnowblog>) to receive regular updates on topics of interest.
- III. **Tweeting in a Community:** students can share ideas (via twitter) with others in their class on an ongoing basis – the class could have a common tag or simply all become friends (ie follow each other). This activity can be added to other activities for example as part of an assignment, the student could twitter their thoughts on an article they have read (or indeed, a tweet), or a video they have watched.
- IV. **Twitterature:** summarizing articles or even whole works of literature into tweets (known as Twitterature), helps the learners focus on what the original text is fundamentally about (in their opinion). Learners can also collaboratively write a piece – perhaps with each tweet as a chapter. In fact, this is similar to the mobile phone novels (keitai shousetsu) being written in Japan.
- V. **Correcting Tweets:** as with any other writing, students will appreciate their tweets being corrected. This can be done collaboratively or individually, as with any other written work.
- VI. **Twitter conversations in class:** some professors use twitter to enable a parallel conversation in class. So students can twitter questions and answer other questions alongside the actual class. It can get a bit busy, but does integrate note-passing into the lesson. One way to do this is to have a class account and participants can send messages to the account (ie start each tweet with @ourclass, where "ourclass" is the account name for the group).

## Pedagogies for Twitter

- **Dogme:** Twitter is all about conversation and so fits in well with the Dogme philosophy. Twitter could be used as the actual medium for the conversation. It could also be used to stimulate conversations within the class or via another (perhaps electronic) form of communication.
- **Task-based Learning:** as a unique, yet practical form of communication, twitter is well suited to task-based language learning. Activities can focus on the conciseness and the speed of response.

## Practicalities

Twitter is a form of social network and there is a tendency to use one's own name (my twitter account is <http://www.twitter.com/howardvickers>). This means that students and teachers may want to have a different twitter account from their own personal account) to keep identities separate.

## Further Information

- Avatar Languages [Blog post about Twitter in language learning.](#)
- Aspiring Polyglot blog post explaining [how to use Twitter for language learning.](#)
- FrenchTeachers.org explains the [use of Twitter in French lessons.](#)
- EduCause has an information sheet on [Twitter in education.](#)

Visit <http://www.avatarlanguages.com/teaching/twitter.php> for multimedia and links.

