

Que fais-tu? Twitter for Language and Culture

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Last spring a new buzzword appeared in the press (1): Twitter, a new Internet tool that facilitates the posting of short messages to the World Wide Web, had suddenly become popular. One reason for Twitter's popularity is that "tweets" can be read and sent via instant messaging programs, e.g., AIM, and via cell phones capable of text messaging (SMS), but they don't necessarily assume a response. In other words, Twitter is a one-to-many form of communication that takes advantage of wireless connectivity through mobile devices.

Twitter works on a simple model. Once you have established a Twitter account at <http://twitter.com>, you can use Settings > Phone & IM to configure Twitter to send and receive tweets through IM or SMS. You can then use IM, SMS, your browser, or a desktop client to send messages of up to 140 characters. If your messages are open to the public, they can be "followed" by anyone else with a Twitter account. In turn you can "follow" as many other account holders as you wish. In Settings > Account you may "protect" your updates, which means that people can follow you only with your approval.

Twitter makes it easy to maintain a virtual community whether personal or professional. As *Seven Things You Should Know about Twitter* (2) notes, "For colleagues who don't live in the same town, Twitter can serve as a "virtual water cooler" where people talk about work, the weather, sports, or anything else that comes up." It is also easy to expand the community, since twitterers can see the followers of all the people they follow and begin to follow them.

Several of Twitter's features suggest that it has value as a tool for language learning and cultural immersion. Most people find it very easy to use. Users of IM applications and sites like Facebook, i.e., most students, are already accustomed to the style of typical tweets. In fact, there is a Twitter plug-in for Facebook. Most important, Twitter is global and multilingual. Both individual and organizational tweets can be created and followed in a number of languages, including French. In fact, not only is Twitter used in French but it has at least two Francophone clones.

Twitter-Based Activities for Language and Culture

Perhaps the most effective way of using Twitter is to follow one or more French or Francophone news feeds. The constant flow of headlines both heightens awareness of the priorities of other societies and maintains a constant connection to contemporary French. For example, a typical recent tweet from RTL Info (<http://twitter.com/rtlinfo>) was "Arche de Zoé: tous les inculpés regroupés à N'Djamena: Les 17 Européens et quatre Tchadiens poursuivis po.. <http://tinyurl.com/27lgm5>." The story behind this headline—and the URL in the tweet leads to the rest of the article—was not well known in the US but was prominent in the French media. It was easy to follow the developments via

headline tweets. Many of the news tweets feature economic news and are, therefore, especially useful for students and teachers of business French.

Discovering the usernames of news organizations can be challenging. They will sometimes appear as "featured tweets" in Twitter's public timeline. Typing all or part of an organization's name in the "find & invite" search box may bring results. A more fruitful technique is to type a topic into the Twitter Search engine listed below under Twitter Tools. For example, a search for "Arche de Zoé" yielded the usernames for *Le Monde*, *Le Nouvel Observateur*, *Le Figaro* and *Le Soir*. To follow tweets from any of the following French news feeds, log into a Twitter account and either type the username into the search box or navigate to [http://twitter.com/\[username\]](http://twitter.com/[username]) and click the "follow" button. Be careful: the usernames are sometimes case sensitive. Note, too, that some feeds from French-speaking countries and organizations are in English; France24 is one example.

- *Le Monde*: LeMondeWorld, LeMondeMedia, LeMondeHead, LeMondeTech
- *L'Echo*: lecho
- *LCI.fr*: ici
- *RTL Info*: rtlinfo
- *Le Soir*: lesoir
- *Le Figaro*: LeFigaro_Info
- *Le Nouvel Observateur*: RSS_NouvelObs
- Belgian News in French: *benews_fr*
- *Radio Suisse Romande*: RSR

Government agencies and other organizations have Twitter usernames, too. AATF members may be particularly interested in the news from the Agence Education Formation (username: AEF). A typical tweet: "Université de Caen: 250 étudiants et lycéens ont manifesté aujourd'hui contre la loi LRU: Nous organisons au .. <http://tinyurl.com/yt7nxd>."

Tweets from news organizations offer opportunities to acquire useful vocabulary and reinforce the learning of geographical names. Headlines quite naturally refer to places, e.g., le Tchad, le Liban, le Mexique, la Birmanie, les Caraïbes, and provide opportunities to practice the appropriate use of articles and prepositions with place names. In another activity, students follow one or two news topics and compile a personal glossary of vocabulary used. After a few days they use the vocabulary to give a brief oral report to the class. Because headline tweets are short but carry a great deal of information, students find them less intimidating than even short news articles and still have the option of delving more deeply via the included URL.

Of course, cultural immersion doesn't have to be limited to news and other organizational feeds. Following one or more individuals sending out French tweets can offer insights into their daily lives and inspire cross-cultural comparisons. Both the Twitter search box and TwitDir allow searching on a place name. Entering a city, e.g., Marseille, leads to a list of individual twitterers; read their profiles and decide whether to follow them. Remember, with Twitter there is no obligation to exchange messages although following

may lead to virtual friendship. One thing students will notice immediately is the mix of English and French used naturally by many twitterers, e.g., "Ready pour les travaux dans mon appart." They will also notice the differences between SMS abbreviations in English and French.

The French Twitter clones are particularly valuable resources for youth culture and SMS jargon. For example, Noumba's (<http://noumba.net>) equivalent of Twitter's "What are you doing?" is "Tu fé koi?", and "j'ai éseyé jai pas réusi" is a typical message. Frazr's (<http://www.frazr.com/fr/>) interface is more sedate and uses "Que fais-tu?" However, abbreviations seen in SMS are still very evident, e.g., "Ms en ts le K ça le met en valeur." These sites have some limitations for the North American classroom: access is available only through the web and SMS; all tweets are public. However, students in the US may not only enjoy the challenge of interpreting the tweets and the insight into the daily lives of their peers abroad but may also want to create a username/avatar and begin to make contact.

Novice learners may also enjoy the daily "quizzes," which the Radio Lingua Network promises are coming soon in French under the username *learnfrench*. RLN already offers these "quizzes"—generally "How do you say ___?"—in Spanish, German, and Italian.

As a platform for language production, Twitter offers some of the same advantages as blogs without the same level of difficulty and anxiety. In fact, Twitter and similar applications call themselves "micro-blogging" applications because collections of tweets resemble blogs. The possibilities for generating written language in tweets are limited only by one's imagination and range from structural practice to engagement with films, presentations, and texts.

For example, most responses to the "Que fais-tu?" question use verbs, so assigning students to send tweets about their activities helps them practice verb choice and conjugation. Or, on a Monday, ask "Qu'as-tu fait hier?" to generate responses in the past. Twitter users often send out messages to specific people. Their messages can be private "direct" messages but most often they go to all one's followers with an @username to designate the intended recipient. Using this protocol, pairs or triads of students can engage in written, conversation-like exchanges that can be seen by all their followers. Others may wish to join in, as Twitter users often do. This type of activity is ideal for brainstorming. Teachers can capture the tweets for later peer discussion or correction. At a more advanced level, students can send 140-character responses to class texts that can then be used as a springboard for class discussion. One of the most rewarding activities is digital storytelling via Twitter. Each tweet is one "chapter" or "episode" of the story. Such an activity develops a sense of narrative pace and concision. Students must concentrate on the quality of the text rather than its length.

TwitterGram (<http://www.twittergram.com>) offers interesting possibilities for adding speech to Twitter. This web-based application uploads and stores a short MP3 (200K is the limit); it then sends a 75-character title and the URL of the MP3 as a tweet from a designated Twitter account. Anyone following that account will be able to play the audio

file in a browser. For example, rather than sending one-sentence film reviews as text tweets, students could record their sentences as MP3s and share them via TwitterGram.

Implementing Twitter in the classroom poses some practical problems. At the minimum, students need access to the Internet to use Twitter; mobile access, whether via wireless laptops or cell phones, is preferable for out-of-class assignments. The easiest way to collect and display student tweets is via a class account that follows all the students. The class account's profile on the web will contain all the tweets and can be displayed in class. An application called TwitterCamp has been designed to display multiple tweets on one large display. It is ideal for classroom use but does not yet display foreign language character sets correctly. An update that solves this problem is expected soon.

Because Twitter is an open resource, anyone planning to use it must consider student privacy. For instructional use, particularly at the K – 12 level, Twitter users should protect their updates. K-12 teachers may also want to be sure that both school administrators and parents are aware of their Twitter use. Teachers and students who use Twitter in their personal lives will probably want to create a separate Twitter account for classroom use.

There is also the issue of cost. Although Twitter is free, cell phone messaging is not. Teachers using Twitter for out-of-class activities must make sure that students understand the charges they may incur. Twitter does allow the user to select how to follow tweets; following with "notifications off" prevents a twitterer's tweets from arriving via IM or SMS, although they will appear in browsers and desktop clients. For example, one may choose to receive the tweets of a class via IM or SMS but turn off notifications for most news services to save messaging costs.

Is Twitter a useful tool or a fad that will soon be supplanted by the next new thing? Will Twitter be abandoned for similar tools with more features like groups and discussion tracking? It is impossible to answer these questions. Jaiku, a tool similar to Twitter, has been acquired by Google and may become more popular. For now, however, Twitter has a global user base that makes it useful for cultural immersion, and its simplicity makes it easy to implement as a platform for informal written communication. For many teachers and learners it offers an engaging way to connect to French language and culture.

Useful Links

Getting Started:

Twitter: <http://www.twitter.com>

Newbie's Guide to Twitter by Rafe Needleman: http://www.webware.com/8301-1_109-9697867-2.html

Twitter Clients:

Twitbin: <http://twitbin.com/> (for FireFox)

Twitterfox: <http://www.naan.net/trac/wiki/TwitterFox> (for FireFox)

Twitterrific: <http://iconfactory.com/software/twitterrific/> (Mac only)

Twitteroo: <http://rareedge.com/twitteroo/> (PC only)

Snitter: <http://snook.ca/snitter/> (cross-platform)
PocketTweets: <http://www.pockettweets.com/> (iPhone)
Twitterbox: <http://ordinalmalaprop.com/twitter/> (for SecondLife)
How to Twitter from Skype: <http://www.pacificit.ca/article/319>

Twitter Clones in French:

Frazr: <http://www.frazr.com/fr/>
Noumba: <http://noumba.net/>

Twitter Tools:

TwitterCamp: <http://www.danieldura.com/code/twittercamp/>
TwitterGram: <http://www.twittergram.com/>
Twitter Search:
<http://www.google.com/coop/cse?cx=004053080137224009376%3Aicdh3tsqkzy>
TwitDir: <http://www.twitdir.com>

Twitter Resources:

Twitter Fan Wiki: <http://twitter.pbwiki.com/>
Twitter Facts: <http://twitterfacts.blogspot.com/>
Twitter Fan Club (FR):
<http://www.wikiservice.at/fractal/wikidev.cgi?FR/TwitterFanClub>
Toute la vérité sur Twitter 1: <http://www.webdeux.info/toute-la-verite-sur-twitter-1>
Toute la vérité sur Twitter 2: <http://www.webdeux.info/toute-la-verite-twitter-deuxieme-partie>

Similar Tools:

Pownce: <http://www.pownce.com/>
Jaiku: <http://jaiku.com/channel>
Tumblr: <http://www.tumblr.com>

References

(1) " Why Everyone's Talking about Twitter." Anita Hamilton. *Time*, March 27, 2007.
<http://www.time.com/time/printout/0,8816,1603637,00.html>.

"The Hyperconnected." Lev Grossman. *Time*, April 5, 2007.
<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1607260,00.html>

"Twitter: Is Brevity The Next Big Thing?" Steven Levy. *Newsweek*, April 9, 2007.
<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/17888481/site/newsweek/page/0/>.

(2) "Seven Things You Should Know About Twitter." Educause Learning Initiative Document ID: ELI7027.
<http://connect.educause.edu/library/abstract/7ThingsYouShouldKnow/44762>