

Twitter as a dynamic language learning platform for learners of Irish as an additional language in a primary school setting in Ireland: review and recommendations

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Abstract. This paper explores the utilisation of *Twitter* as a dynamic language learning platform in order to create an authentic domain of use for learners of Irish as an Additional Language (IAL) in a primary school setting in Ireland wherein 20 fourth class children and their parents participated. The Irish language context is firstly introduced, which contextualises a rationale for utilising *Twitter* for language learning. Teacher, child, and parent engagement with *Twitter* is then outlined with reference to the action research methodology employed. The repository of class tweets, periodic participant advisory group discussions and questionnaires, coupled with teacher-researcher reflection informed a qualitative data analysis. Results indicate notable student engagement with and enjoyment of tweeting in class as *Gaeilge* [in Irish] whereby the class *Twitter* account emerged as a practicable language learning platform. Its affordances enabled the student composition and publishing of short texts (tweets) and the provision of authentic Irish tweets for class reading. Parent and child engagement out of class, while relatively low, also demonstrated a promising additional domain of use, subject to the negotiation of orientation-related and implementation-related challenges for learners in a blended setting. In conclusion, recommendations to support the use of *Twitter* in endangered language school contexts are suggested.

Keywords: *Twitter*, microblogging, Irish language, primary school.

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1. Introduction

The Irish language is spoken by a minority of the population on a daily basis outside of education (1.7%) and is categorised as an endangered language. While the Irish immersion education (IME) sector has experienced growth and success, most children in Ireland learn IAL at English-medium schools where Irish is a compulsory and core subject. There are ongoing concerns regarding children's attainment in Irish at primary school level in English-medium education coupled with a lack of opportunity for learners to experience Irish as a living language in additional domains other than school (Harris, 2008; Inspectorate, 2022).

The potential of social media to open new digital spaces for learners and to extend language learning opportunities is well documented. A number of critical reviews and studies (Barrot, 2021; Hattem & Lomicka, 2016) identify key affordances of Twitter for language learners such as brevity of written tasks, interaction with (native) speakers, learner agency, and community building.

Digital literacies today such as social media engagement are characterised as *participative*, *multifarious*, and *everyday* (Reinhardt & Thorne, 2019) compared with more traditional digital activities involving bidirectional teacher and student exchange. Educators are encouraged to “consider involving broader audiences and purposes that would help students to engage with the world outside of the classroom” (Reinhardt & Thorne, 2019, p. 218), which resonates with the minority language context whereby social media can be harnessed to create language learning opportunities (Cunliffe, 2021).

2. Class Twitter account engagement

The exploration of utilising Twitter as a dynamic platform for Irish language learning forms part of a larger Irish language action research study informed by a socio-cultural theory theoretical framework, which explores Web 2.0 technology-mediated language and tutoring (peer tutoring and student-parent tutoring).

A fourth class (n=20, ten years of age approximately, ten girls and ten boys) and their parents (n=20) voluntarily took part in the school-based study as active participants in partnership with the class teacher in the role of teacher-researcher. Parents' consent and children's assent were negotiated at the outset as part of a university-approved ethics plan inclusive of secure data retention and child-

friendly internet engagement stipulations. Three Action Cycles³ took place over the course of an academic school year. The class Twitter account was introduced at the halfway point of Action Cycle 1, after peer tutoring had commenced.

A dedicated class Twitter account was set up independently of the school's communication channels and it was curated by the teacher-researcher on behalf of the class. The modelling and co-writing model of use sought to create regular, short, achievable and *everyday* (Reinhardt & Thorne, 2019) Irish language writing opportunities for the class in addition to reading authentic Irish tweets and related potential community building (Cunliffe, 2021). Parents were invited to join Twitter, follow the class account and engage with class tweets with their child as a shared Irish language activity. A class newsletter of tweets was also collated and shared periodically.

Data collection comprised of the repository of class tweets, participant advisory group discussions and questionnaires, and the teacher-researcher's reflective diary over the course of three Action Cycles.

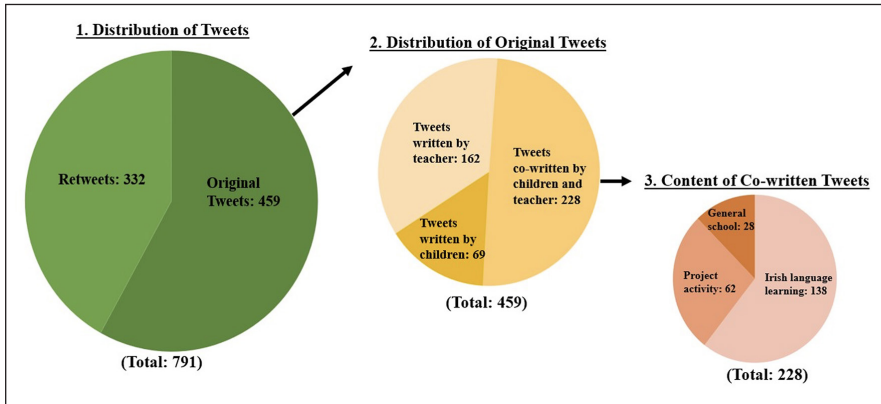
Analysis of the class tweets focused on tweet authorship and subject content. A qualitative analysis approach was undertaken whereby a thematic analysis of advisory group discussions was triangulated with questionnaire and diary findings, and tweet analysis.

3. Results and discussion

Over the course of the language project, the class Twitter account produced 459 original tweets. Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of tweets and original tweets as well as the categorisation of the content of co-written tweets. The scaffolded approach to tweet writing is broadly reflected in the fact that 49.7% of original tweets were co-written by the children and teacher. Of the co-written tweets, 60% reflected the learning in Irish lessons.

3. An Action Cycle refers to sequential informed activity carried out during a designated time characterised by the identification and/or observation of a concern, planning and implementation, review of actions and progression to a further action cycle or conclusion of project.

Figure 1. Breakdown of class tweets



An analysis of children’s questionnaires and discussions indicate that a clear majority of the class (17/18) reported enjoyment in relation to writing and reading and agreed (18/18) that Twitter was a useful tool to learn and improve one’s Irish. Two children shared awareness of the potential to connect with other Irish speakers: “I think it’s really cool to see how other people and not just in school, they are actually using Irish and, like, what they have to say in Irish” (Child 4). Five children recommended that more time be afforded to reading Irish tweets in class. Of the ten children who expressed a desire to be involved with home-based Twitter activity, one child commented: “Yeah, I never got the chance to do it at home [reading tweets] ...But I would want to do it at home” (Child 17).

In terms of parental engagement, 5/20 parents joined Twitter and followed the class account and three parents and their respective children engaged with the class account. Parents expressed their support for the role of technology, citing how the children were adept at its use. Unfamiliarity with Twitter was notable, in addition to confusion with two platforms (Twitter and Class Blog) being in use: “Well you see I didn’t know we could go on it” (Parent 1). Nevertheless, children reported notable parental engagement with the printed class newsletter of tweets.

4. Conclusion

The findings suggest that the children were positively disposed towards the use of Twitter for Irish language purposes. Parents’ feedback indicates that family use of Twitter outside the classroom may have been affected by unfamiliarity with the

application and potential intervention overload. The importance of the role of the teacher as curator and facilitator also emerged.

While small-scale and context-specific, this exploratory study gives an insight to learner engagement with and experience of a social networking platform, the potential affordances of Twitter in this learning context, and the role of the teacher in engaging learners. The utilisation of Twitter as a scaffolded writing tool facilitated an agentic approach to Irish language writing, which enabled learners to engage with the language in a new and authentic domain of use (Cunliffe, 2021). The study addresses a research gap both in terms of exploring the use of social networking sites such as Twitter for language learning at primary level and in terms of the potential of such a platform in an endangered language context.

Recommendations for future implementation based on the findings are as follows.

- Utilisation of and further exploration of Twitter as a writing tool in a scaffolded capacity to engage primary school Irish language learners in realisable writing tasks.
- Introduction of Twitter to parents on a phased basis whereby sufficient time is given to explore account set up and application affordances.
- Invitation to parents to join Twitter at the latter stages of a blended language learning project when a greater connection with the overarching project aims has been established.
- Facilitation of teachers to avail of the school Twitter account for the potential piloting of language learning prior to potential establishment of a class Twitter account.

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