Tilburg University

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Hsiao, A.; Broeder, Peter

Published in:
Language Learning in Higher Education

DOI:
[10.1515/cercles-2014-0024](https://doi.org/10.1515/cercles-2014-0024)

Publication date:
2014

[Link to publication in Tilburg University Research Portal](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Hsiao, A., & Broeder, P. (2014). Let's tweet in Chinese! Exploring how learners of Chinese as a foreign language self-direct their use of microblogging to learn Chinese. *Language Learning in Higher Education*, 4(2), 469-488.
<https://doi.org/10.1515/cercles-2014-0024>

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2014 · VOLUME 4 · NUMBER 2

LANGUAGE LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Journal of the European Confederation of Language Centres
in Higher Education (CercleS)

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**DE GRUYTER
MOUTON**

Ya Ping (Amy) Hsiao and Peter Broeder

Let's tweet in Chinese! Exploring how learners of Chinese as a foreign language self-direct their use of microblogging to learn Chinese

Abstract: Twitter is becoming increasingly popular as a medium for language learning. This study explores self-directed learning via social interactions that use Twitter as an interactive learning environment. The participants in this study were thirty university students of Chinese as a foreign language at levels 1 and 2 of the *Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi* (HSK). Prior to the Twitter activity they self-assessed their confidence on content topics and made plans to self-direct their learning for seven weeks. In addition, they all took part in a training session in which they were given written instructions on how to tweet in a group message-board setting. The data that were collected included students' responses to a motivation questionnaire before and after the Twitter activity (pre and post motivation), their tweets, their evaluation of the Twitter activity, and their learning achievement based on their scores in the final exam. The analysis of their tweets is related to the curriculum content and their Twitter (activity) plan. The results showed that the students created an interactive learning environment to practice their Chinese with their peers in active sentence constructions. Students' Twitter behavior and motivation for using Twitter to practice Chinese correlated significantly with their learning achievement. In addition, students became familiar with a range of choices to practice Chinese. However, half of them failed to follow the Twitter plan they had drawn up and only one-fifth of their tweets involved social interactions. Finally, barriers to and suggestions for future research on microblogging in the learning of Chinese are discussed.

Keywords: Twitter, teaching Chinese as a foreign language (CFL), self-directed learning, social learning

DOI 10.1515/cercles-2014-0024

Ya Ping (Amy) Hsiao: Language Centre, Tilburg University, The Netherlands.

E-mail: y.p.hsiao@tilburguniversity.edu

Peter Broeder: Tilburg University, The Netherlands. E-mail: peter@broeder.com

(a “tweeter”) can write and send out many messages or tweets in a single day without much time or effort. Twitter was selected for the present exploratory pedagogical project because its features and functions are ideally suited to CFL learners at beginners’ levels such as the first two levels of the *Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi* (HSK) (Hanban 2008) (i.e., levels described as equivalent to A1 and A2 in the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (Council of Europe 2001), although such benchmarking can be problematic). According to the HSK guidelines, CFL learners at these two levels can “understand and use very simple Chinese phrases, meet basic needs for communication and possess the ability to further their Chinese language studies” (HSK1), and “have an excellent grasp of basic Chinese and can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar and routine matters” (HSK2) (Hanban 2008). CFL learners at these two levels can be expected to be able to express themselves in short sentences on basic topics in their daily lives, making the use of Twitter to practice their Chinese quite possible. In contrast to drills, the use of Twitter allows CFL learners to process Chinese words and sentences actively. A communication medium like Twitter can provide learners of Chinese with the necessary social context and allow them to truly interact with others.

Recently, Twitter has been applied in a variety of educational activities, such as collaborative learning, group discussions and language learning (Borau et al. 2009; Honey and Herring 2009; Ullrich et al. 2010; Lomicka and Lord 2012). However, only a very limited number of studies have focused on Twitter in language learning settings (Borau et al. 2009; Ullrich et al. 2010; Lomicka and Lord 2012). In language learning Twitter can be used as a chat tool, to develop a sense of community, to give feedback, and to discuss grammar (Stevens 2008). It seems that the focus of most Twitter studies in language learning has been on the impact of using Twitter on learners’ attitudes and their sense of community (Borau et al. 2009; Ullrich et al. 2010; Junco et al. 2011; Lomicka and Lord 2012). In one study in which Twitter was used as a communication medium to practice English, 25% of the participating students, all of whom were native speakers of Chinese, stated that they checked Twitter posts several times a day, and 70% of the students found that communication in English became easier after using Twitter (Borau et al. 2009). Findings that focused on Twitter improving learners’ sense of community indicate that Twitter creates a social environment where learners can construct meanings from interaction (Borau et al. 2009; Ullrich et al. 2010; Lomicka and Lord 2012). It is a tool that allows learners to socialize with others, to “converse” with them, catching up on each other’s updates. Although these positive effects confirm the potential of using Twitter for language learning purposes, no attention has so far been paid to the implementation of the use

2.2 Participants and settings

Two groups of students participated in the study: 17 students taking a Chinese Beginners' Course (HSK1) and 13 students taking a Chinese Elementary Course (HSK2). Of these students, 18 were male and 12 female. The students were majoring in various subjects in their respective Bachelor's and Master's courses at the same university. One of the participants was not a student at the university. Neither the beginners' course nor the elementary course was compulsory in any of the students' regular curricula. They received six credits for completing their course if they attained more than 6 points out of a maximum of 10. The final score for the Chinese courses under discussion here was made up as follows: electronic homework (30%), speaking performance (assessment) (25%), the Twitter activity (15%), and the end of course exam (30%).

At HSK1 level, the beginners' course first introduces the students to Pinyin transcription (a phonetic system for transcribing Chinese characters into Latin script), after which they learn ten thematic word groups in simple sentences. Upon completion of this course, the students should be able to understand and use very simple Chinese phrases as well as meet basic communication needs. At the HSK2 level, the elementary course introduces students to eleven grammar topics and to the 150 most frequently used Chinese characters. The words from the ten thematic word groups at HSK1 level are used in more idiosyncratic sentence patterns based on the grammar topics at HSK2 level. Upon completion of this course, the students should be able to comprehend basic Chinese and communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar and routine matters. Although Chinese characters are introduced at this level, Pinyin transcriptions are still used for most written communication since the students are familiar with only 150 Chinese characters.

2.3 Implementing the Twitter activity

The Twitter activity was implemented using GroupTweet, a software tool that organizes and archives all communications under a single Twitter timeline. In GroupTweet, students only have to provide a single Twitter account to be able follow all the conversations, instead of having to follow every other student individually. Each student was helped to draw up a learning contract in order to support his or her participation in the Twitter activity: A Twitter plan. The purpose of this Twitter plan was to operationalize individual learning needs by first identifying content topics that required attention by students, and then deciding and planning what to do to develop each of these topics. To create the learning

2.5 Procedures

The Twitter activity was regarded as a preparatory activity for the final exam that took place at the end of both courses. In the seventh week of the course (term week 17), the teacher introduced the purpose and procedure of this Twitter activity as well as the use of a Twitter plan to practice weak content topics. Students were asked to fill out the Intrinsic Motivation Inventory, to specify their individual Twitter plan for various topics, and to answer the aforementioned three questions regarding their prior Twitter experience and expectations. The teacher (the first author of this study) kept a copy of each student's completed Twitter plan. Students were given a tutorial in which they got written instructions on how to use GroupTweet. To check whether they had understood the instructions, every student had to log onto the Twitter website during class, send a tweet, and reply to others' tweets. In the tutorial, the information the students were given was as follows: (i) the score they would receive on this Twitter activity would depend on how well they carried out their Twitter plan (whether the actual tweets matched the plan); (ii) they were free to use either Pinyin transcription or characters to practice Chinese; and (iii) they were allowed to modify their plans if they felt this was necessary, but they had to mark the changes. In the eighth week of the course (term week 18), the students started tweeting as set out in their Twitter plans and continued to do so for seven weeks. At the end of the course (term week 24), they handed in their Twitter plans, took the final exam, filled out the Intrinsic Motivation Inventory and completed an evaluation survey of the Twitter activity.

3 Results

3.1 How do students self-direct their learning of Chinese through this Twitter activity?

The dataset of all tweets was requested and downloaded from the account page of GroupTweet. Each tweet was coded based on the number of the thematic topics (HSK1) or the number of the grammar topics (HSK2). Figure 1 shows an example of a Twitter conversation on the topic "Family" by two students taking the beginners' (HSK1) course ("I have one elder brother. What is your elder brother called?" "My elder brother is called Remi, what is your elder brother called?");

course students' tweets were in Chinese characters, whereas 91% of beginners' (HSK1) course students' tweets were in Pinyin. Although students on the beginners' (HSK1) course had not yet formally been taught any characters, 65% of them nevertheless tried to tweet in Chinese characters. The content of most students' tweets focused a one single topic, but 11% of students included two or three topics in each tweet. Table 1 gives an overview of the self-assessments by the students in the beginners and elementary course for each content/grammar topic. The number of tweets on each topic is also shown.

The results of the students' self-assessments in the beginners' (HSK1) course show that they were quite confident on the ten content topics. The means of self-assessment scores ranged from the 5.53 (for Topic 10: "Curriculum subjects and

Table 1: Students' self-assessments per topic in their Twitter plans and total number of tweets

<i>Beginners course (N = 17 students)</i>			
Topic in Twitter plan	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	N total tweets
1. Introductions and greetings	6.50	1.98	106
2. Nationalities and languages	6.59	1.42	90
3. Family: <i>How many people are there in your family?</i>	5.82	1.42	45
4. Food and drink	7.06	1.68	83
5. Jobs	5.94	1.52	52
6. Things in the living room	5.76	1.71	43
7. Place words: in the home and at school	5.69	1.92	87
8. Activities	6.00	2.00	88
9. Days of the week, time and weather	5.82	1.74	49
10. Curriculum subjects and school life	5.53	1.97	70
11. Chinese year signs, dates, age and birthdays	5.47	2.42	47
<i>Elementary Course (N = 12 students)</i>			
Grammar in Twitter plan	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	N total tweets
1. Modal verbs	5.96	1.51	73
2. Sentences with serial verb phrases	6.00	1.41	62
3. The particle <i>le</i>	4.85	1.14	82
4. The particle <i>le</i> not used for completed actions	5.46	1.61	15
5. Pivotal sentences	4.00	2.08	21
6. The complement of state (adverb)	4.92	1.26	41
7. Co-verbs (prepositions)	6.15	1.52	55
8. The simple directional complement	5.31	1.38	4
9. Comparison using the preposition <i>bi</i>	3.31	2.32	46
10. Expressing similarities and differences	3.54	2.50	4
<i>Note: M = mean on 10-point scale, 1 = very poorly, 10 = very well. SD = standard deviation.</i>			

Table 2: Students' pre- and post-motivation for the Twitter activity

<i>All students (N = 29)</i>	Pre		Post		<i>t-test</i>	<i>p-value</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Interest/Enjoyment	4.19	1.09	4.10	1.21	.45	.66
Perceived competence	4.48	.69	3.79	1.47	2.50	.02*
Effort/Importance	4.74	1.00	4.09	1.48	2.88	.01*
Pressure/Tension	2.71	.80	3.07	1.56	-1.37	.18
Perceived choice	3.80	1.04	4.41	.90	-2.99	.01*
Value/Usefulness	4.98	1.09	4.79	1.33	.86	.40
Overall motivation	4.04	.97	4.10	.91	-.34	.74
<i>Beginners' course (N = 17)</i>						
Interest/Enjoyment	4.33	.92	4.22	1.27	.36	.73
Perceived competence	4.34	.57	3.75	1.48	1.70	.11
Effort/Importance	4.62	.93	4.25	1.32	1.27	.22
Pressure/Tension	2.78	.84	3.34	1.61	-1.45	.17
Perceived choice	3.99	.88	4.56	.87	-2.18	.05
Value/Usefulness	5.20	.70	4.90	1.02	1.20	.25
Overall motivation	4.01	1.12	4.23	.83	-.82	.43
<i>Elementary course (N = 12)</i>						
Interest/Enjoyment	4.00	1.31	3.94	1.17	.27	.79
Perceived competence	4.63	.81	3.83	1.53	1.78	.10
Effort/Importance	4.91	1.11	3.88	1.72	2.97	.01*
Pressure/Tension	2.63	.79	2.71	1.48	-.24	.82
Perceived choice	3.55	1.22	4.21	.94	-1.96	.08
Value/Usefulness	4.68	1.47	4.64	1.73	.09	.93
Overall motivation	4.09	.77	3.93	1.02	.83	.43

* $p < .05$

Note: *M* = mean on a 7-point scale, 1 = not at all true, 7 = very true. *SD* = standard deviation. Increase of motivation is shaded.

tivation could be observed for both courses on most subscales. The students on the elementary (HSK2) course found the Twitter activity significantly less important. For both courses a (non-significant) increase emerged in more *pressure/tension* being felt and more *perceived choices* being observed after than before the Twitter activity.

Bivariate Pearson correlations were calculated to find out the associations between (i) students' Twitter behavior and learning performance, and (ii) students' motivation and learning achievement. Learning achievement was represented by the scores on the exam taken at the end of each course. The students'

Table 4: Students' use of their Twitter plans

	<i>Disagree (1–3)</i>	<i>Neutral (4)</i>	<i>Agree (5–7)</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
Making the Twitter plan helped me to reflect on my learning progress on each topic.	44.8% (13)	24.1% (7)	31% (9)	3.52	1.55
My Twitter plan has guided me to focus on the weak topics.	48.3% (14)	20.7% (6)	31% (9)	3.52	1.57
While tweeting, I consulted my Twitter plan.	31% (9)	6.9% (2)	62.1% (18)	4.72	2.34
My tweets matched the plan I made.	51.7% (15)	6.9% (2)	41.3% (12)	3.83	2.05
I changed the Twitter plan.	48.3% (14)	0	51.7% (15)	4.00	2.42

Note. *M* = mean on a 7-point scale, 1 = disagree, 7 = agree. *SD* = standard deviation.

The students were asked to suggest improvements they would make to this Twitter activity if they were the teacher. Their suggestions were categorized into five themes and can be summarized by giving a few typical examples:

1. Early start:

“Maybe twitter less sentences in a week, but starting earlier in the course.”

2. Use a general Twitter plan for the whole class:

“Maybe a general Twitter plan is a good idea, so everyone has the same subject to tweet about in a week.”

“Perhaps choose a topic every week which everyone can tweet/talk about.”

3. Make it more interactive:

“Maybe you could be more interactive. If you put questions directly to people or to the group, students could be (more) motivated to reply to you. Or you could start a discussion which everyone has to respond to.”

4. Reduce the number of tweets:

“Less tweets per week. It is sometimes difficult to twitter ten times about one topic.”

5. Experience or preferences with Twitter:

“The reason that I did not actively participate in this Twitter activity is that I’m not used to using Twitter. Hence I only look once in a while at Twitter and most of the time no one is twittering at that time.”

“I did not really like the Twitter assignment because I don’t like Twitter.”

skills in monitoring and reflecting on their learning process and needs in real time to modify their plan. Monitoring and reflecting are indispensable skills for self-directed learning to be successful. It might be useful to measure or survey students' learning skills and to provide guidance or training in these skills prior to implementing self-directed language learning.

Our results showed that only 20% of the tweets were conversations, which seems to indicate that social interaction occurred infrequently during this Twitter activity. However, as we observed, most of the tweets were formulated starting with a kind of salutation, addressed to others, e.g., “Tóngxuémen hǎo! Wǒ xìng XX, jiào XX, ~ ^^ Rènshi nǐ hěn gāoxìng~!” (“Hello classmates! My name is XX, nice to meet you!”), or to initiate interactions, e.g., “Wǔ’ān! Jìntiān wǒ qù kàn diànyǐng. Nimen xǐhuan zuò shénme?” (“Good afternoon! I am going to see a movie today. What do you like to do?”). Though there were often no direct responses to tweets of this kind, this does not mean that these tweets were totally isolated from other forms of social interaction: the students might still have read each other's tweets. One possible explanation for students not responding could be that they made their choices based exclusively on what they were supposed to tweet about according to their Twitter plan. Another possible explanation for the low number of conversations might be technical problems involved in using Twitter, as one student reported in the post-questionnaire: “Maybe it is due to my lack of knowledge about Twitter, but I do not seem to be able to see a conversation when replying to someone”. These technical barriers might have influenced how they used Twitter to interact with others.

Unlike other Twitter studies (Borau et al. 2009; Lomicka and Lord 2012), this study did not assign students explicit tasks to accomplish. However, as is suggested by recent studies in social constructivism, it is necessary to design tasks that induce social interaction in order to increase cognitive change, learning in particular (Salomon and Perkins 1998; Dillenbourg 1999). The students participating in our study suggested several ways of making activity more interactive, for example: “You should start a discussion which everyone has to respond to”, and “If you put questions directly to people or to the group, students could be (more) motivated to reply to you”. To stimulate social interaction, future research could also train learners in peer learning strategies such as peer correction and peer feedback. These strategies not only create more interaction but also stimulate students to think more about their own learning. Based on our findings, Twitter seems to have some potential for fostering social interaction as well as peer correction and feedback in the CFL classroom.

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Content topics in Twitter plan for beginners' (HSK 1) course in Chinese

Content topic	Sentence pattern	English translation in
1. Introductions and greetings	<i>Nín guìxìng?</i> (formal) <i>Nǐ xìng/jiào shénme?</i> (informal) <i>Wǒ xìng/jiào ____.</i> <i>Zhè shì ____ xiānsheng/tàitai/xiǎojiě.</i> <i>Rènshi nín hěn gāoxìng.</i>	<i>What is your name?</i> (formal) <i>What are you called?</i> (informal) <i>I am called ____.</i> <i>This is Mr/Mrs/Miss ____.</i> <i>Nice to meet you.</i>
2. Nationalities and languages	<i>Nǐ shì nǎ guó rén? Wǒ shì ____ rén.</i> <i>Nǐ xué(xī) shénme? Wǒ xué(xī) ____.</i> <i>Nǐ shuō nǎ guó huà? Wǒ shuō <u>Héyǔ</u>/Hélán huà.</i>	<i>What is your nationality? I am ____.</i> <i>What do you learn? I learn ____.</i> <i>What languages do you speak? I speak ____.</i>
3. Family: How many people are there in your family?	<i>Zhè/Nà shì shéi? Zhè/Nà shì wǒ ____.</i> <i>Nǐ yǒu ____ ma? Wǒ yǒu/méi yǒu ____.</i> <i>Nǐ(men) jiā yǒu jǐ kǒu rén?</i> <i>Wǒ(men) jiā yǒu <u>sì</u> kǒu rén.</i>	<i>Who is this/that? This/That is my ____.</i> <i>Do you have ____? Yes, I do./ No, I don't.</i> <i>How many people are there in your family? There are ____ people in my family.</i>

Content topic	Sentence pattern	English translation in
10. Curriculum subjects and school life	Nǐ xuéxí shénme zhuānyè?	What is your major?
	Wǒ xuéxí jīngjì zhuānyè.	My major is <u>economics</u> .
	Nǐ shì shénme xī de xuésheng?	At which faculty are you studying?
	Wǒ shì jīngjì xī de xuésheng.	
	Nǐ rènshi ____ jiàoshòu/lǎoshī ma?	I am studying at the faculty of <u>economics</u> .
	(Type 1 Yes/No questions)	Do you know professor/teacher ____?
	Nǐ rèn bu rènshi ____ jiàoshòu/lǎoshī?	(Type 1 and Type 2 Yes/No questions)
11. Chinese year signs, dates, age and birthdays	Nǐ shǔ shénme?	What is your Chinese astrological sign?
	Wǒ shǔ hǔ.	
	Jīntiān shì jǐ yuè jǐ hào?	My Chinese sign is <u>tiger</u> .
	Jīntiān shì 4 yuè 29 hào.	What date is today?
	Nǐ jīnnián duō dà?	It is 29 th April today.
	Wǒ jīnnián 38 suì.	How old are you this year?
	Nǐ de shēngri shì shénme shíhou?	I am 38 years old this year.
	Wǒ de shēngri shì 4 yuè 29 hào.	When is your birthday?
		My birthday is 29 th April.

Grammar topics in Twitter plan for Elementary (HSK 2) course in Chinese

Grammar topic	Sentence pattern
1. Modal verbs	S + V1 (néng/huì/kěyǐ/yīnggāi/xiǎng/yào/yuànyì) + V2 + O
2. Sentences with serial verb phrases	S + V1O + V2O Example: Wǒ qù jiàoshì shàngkè.
3. The particle 了	S + V + 了 + Nu-M/A/Pr + O S + V + 了
4. The particle 了	了 is not used for completed actions
5. Pivotal sentences	S + V1 (ràng, qǐng, jiào, yào, huānyíng) + O1 + V2 + O2
6. The complement of state (adverb)	4 types
7. Co-verbs (prepositions)	S + Co-V + V + O Example: Wǒ yòng kuàizi chī miàn.
8. The simple directional complement	S + motion verb + lái (towards the speaker)/qu (away from the speaker) Example: Qǐng guàlai wǒ zhèr yíxià.
9. Comparison using the preposition 比	S1 + 比 + S2 + Adj./V Example: Tā bǐ nǐ gāo.
10. Expressing similarities and differences	S1 跟 S2 一样, S1 跟 S2 不一样