FOSTERING FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING WITH TWITTER: REFLECTIONS FROM ENGLISH LEARNERS

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ABSTRACT

Education in 21st century is dominated by the generation of digital natives who are greatly exposed to and participate in technology in their social and educational lives. There is no doubt that anything experienced in social life directly affects learners' educational experiences. Highly popular social networks are being used in almost every educational area. In the process of teaching English as a foreign language social networking sites enhance active participation of learners for real purposes. This helps them gain motivation and real life experience through gaining different roles, such as authors and readers. One of the most widely used social networking sites is Twitter, a microblogging platform. This study focuses on use of twitter as a microblogging platform by learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) at Anadolu University School of Foreign Languages. The study aims to gain insights about learners' perceptions of the use of Twitter in language learning process and how participants feel about their tweeting as an extra -curricular activity throughout 4 weeks, each consisting of three different hot topics either determined by the class teachers or by students themselves. The study based on voluntary participation, and the content had no relation with the curriculum. The participants answered a questionnaire and evaluated Twitter along with language learning process. The results reveal that Turkish learners had mostly positive opinions on using Twitter and stated that twitting messages facilitated their language learning experience. Including extracurricular activities, such as Twitter, into language teaching is suggested as a result of this study.

Keywords: Twitter, Social Networking Site, EFL, micro-blogging, foreign language learning.

INTRODUCTION

The millennium generation was born into a century in which the technology has started to dominate almost every area of daily life. Especially the Internet use has become a significant part of their lives. Thus, this generation is also called as 'netizens' (Hauben, 1995). From this generation's standpoint, technology is a natural part of their environment. This has led educators to blend their teaching with technology in order to provide learners with the optimum conditions for learning. Especially social networking has gained popularity among teenagers, which has provided opportunities for educators to plan their teaching according to these new trends. Social networks, such as Twitter, have also started to be used in foreign language teaching (Aydın, 2014; Greenhow & Gleeson, 2012; Johnson, 2015).

As digital natives, today's students are not satisfied with the traditional modes of learning, and English as a foreign language (EFL) learners who get disengaged and unmotivated in traditional classroom environment are no exception. They are not passive receivers of information any more, and they rather create, modify, and share information through connection and collaboration. The demand of most of the students who learn English as a foreign language has increased towards activities that engage them into language learning process directly rather than the activities causing learners feel themselves passive.

Foreign language learning is a process, which is not confined to classroom borders. It takes place outside the school environment and it becomes more effective when carried beyond the classroom. EFL students can often lose their motivation to learn with traditional classroom activities. They cannot go beyond considering English as a school subject rather than a real communication mean because they tend to practice the language only in the classroom environment. In order to minimize this drawback, use of technology, especially social networks have been increasing in foreign language education. This helps educators and learners benefit from the opportunities provided by social networks, such as Twitter. Twitter as a micro blogging is such a tool that enhances student collaboration and interaction. Learners engage in meaningful communication outside the classroom by using the target language. They also get the advantage of improving their language skills with the immediate feedback from other learners and teachers as well. Although much research has recently taken use of social networking in language learning process in the spotlight, in Turkish foreign language learning context not much research has focused on the use of social networks such as Twitter. **Theoretical Perspective**

In formulation of a theoretical perspective for studying the relationship between EFL learners' proficiency levels, academic achievement, and their participation in creative writing activity in Twitter, social constructivist theory provides a useful prototype. Based on Vygotsky's social constructivist theory, education does not merely mean a cognitive basis for improvement, but also a socio-cultural activity (Vygotsky, 1978). According to Vygotsky, learning takes place in a social environment in which individuals learn from one another by interacting with each other constantly and observing what the others are doing. This social learning process has implications in education as well. Today, with the widespread use of educational technologies and social media, this social process is often observed in educational contexts. These educational technologies and social media provide bountiful opportunities for students to connect, collaborate, and interact. As a polyglot (plurilingual speaker) Vygotsky himself underlined the importance of connection in people's perception of the events (Lindqvist, 2003). Thus, twitter as a social platform can enhance language learning process through collaboration and interaction. It also paves the way for getting help form others in language learning process. This means, the concept "zone of proximal development" by Vygotsky (1978) can be well achieved through discussion threads in which participants give and receive immediate feedback from many different sources, namely different participants. Getting assistance of peers as well as of the teachers helps learners perform better than they do when they are on their own.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Education has shifted from the traditional applications to the technology use in the classrooms. It is now an established fact that the use of technology facilitates teaching and learning in language classrooms. According to Taranto, Dalbon, and Gaetano (2011),

as the world becomes more and more connected, classroom experiences need to reflect those same changes because today's students' profiles are quite different from the earlier ones. It is referred as the "Z-generation" or "Net-generation" as technology and the World Wide Web are the two most familiar objects to them (Horovitz, 2012). This "Net- generation" has been found to be applying different methods of learning from the earlier generations (Sandars and Morrison, 2007) as they are more "experiential, engaged and constantly connected" (Ramaley and Zia, 2005). It has also been suggested that the Net Generation students prefer independent learning style and take the benefits of technology for better learning (Carlson, 2005). In this case, teachers need to be aware of new digital literacy and infuse them with their curricular planning and classroom practices (Greenhow, Robelia, and Hughes, 2009).

With the advancement of technology and the use of technology in education, social networking sites (SNSs) have emerged. Boyd & Ellison (2007) define social network sites as web-based services that allow individuals to "(1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system" (p. 211). Since their introduction, SNSs such as MySpace, Facebook, and Twitter have attracted millions of users, many of whom have integrated these sites into their daily practices. SNSs have been quite popular among various age group users, particularly the young users. According to Thorne (2010), one of the main reasons for the immense popularity of social networking is the process of potentially maintaining and developing online relationships. It is not only a way to view pictures of friends such as on Facebook, view short messages on Twitter, or post videos on YouTube, it is also as a form of expression, interaction, and community building.

Recent descriptions of SNSs have put forward that these sites might be used in educational contexts to promote cultural awareness, interaction, and collaboration (Ferdig, Coutts, DiPietro, Lok, & Davis, 2007). Social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, forums, blogs let people talk to each other online. There are also an increasing number of sites designed specifically for language learning. With these sites, language learners talk to each other, and with native speakers, and often include languagelearning exercises to try. These social media platforms allow people to create informal networks that are not bound by geography. They are informal, fun, easy to use, and allow access to a far broader range of experience than would be possible without them. (Mishra, 2013) These social networking sites have also proven to be useful in language learning as they are more engaging and inspiring for learners to use the target language, and minimize learners' fear and nervousness and authority of the instructor (Gilbert, Fiske, & Lindzey, 1998; Beauvois, 1998). Students do not experience anxiety or any kind of fear stemmed from the peer pressure and the authority of the instructor. Also, they are conceived to be able to motivate (Greenhow, Robelia, & Hughes, 2009) and expose learners to the authentic use of the target language (Baralt, 2011). Hence, the use of social networking has become very popular among English language learners. According to Srinivas (2010), social networking is one tool, which can assist teachers and learners to access information and facilitate the learning of English.

In terms of materials used by the students, SNSs bring a different perspective to the context of education. It provides an opportunity for both instructors and learners to be exposed to the language through authentic activities and materials, and thus can promote constructivist learning through meaningful communication (Woo, Herrington, Agostinho, & Reeves, 2007). According to Chartrand (2012), the online social networking sites not only motivate the Net-generation learners to use relevant learning materials, but also let the learner experience the authentic usage of a language in communication. The use of SNSs for language teaching puts an emphasis on using the target language as a resource for building interpersonal relationships that differentiates it from traditional approaches to language learning pedagogy and provides an opportunity for success. In this way, language acquisition will be promoted to a great extent.

As it is mentioned above, social networking sites have also been used in foreign language learning context in higher education. One of the most commonly used social networking sites used in language learning is Twitter. In a study conducted by Castrillo de Larreta-Azelain (2013) Spanish students who were learning German as a foreign language participated in a Twitter activity voluntarily. The participants were free to choose the topics that are relevant to grammar structures in their curriculum. They tweeted at least three times each week and a teacher gave feedback to students' tweets regularly. The results of a survey explored participants' evaluation of perceived strengths and weaknesses of the activity, their motivation and to what extent they had benefited from the activity in terms of their language learning process. The majority of students (72.2%) believed taking part in Twitter activity contributed to their German writing skills. Similarly, the majority of students liked the activity (77.7%) and stated that they wanted to continue using Twitter. However, 15% of students expressed negative opinions regarding the value of Twitter task as a language-learning tool because of the difficulty of writing only 140 characters per post.

Supporting the view that SNSs contributing language learning and teaching, the use of Twitter in a French class was found to have positive effects on language teaching and learning (Lomicka & Lord, 2012), and it fostered collaboration among students in an English class (Koenig, 2011).

The perceived benefits of Twitter use for language learning were examined in relation to constructivist theory in a French class in Johnson's study (2015). The comments by the students indicated that they enjoyed using Twitter for fast, fun and easy communication. Regardless of the varying language proficiency levels, the students were participating eagerly in answering questions, checking replies from tweet-pals.

Twitter as a microblogging platform was used in an EFL context in the study by Borau, Ullrich, Feng and Shen (2009). Chinese students who were learning English as a foreign language participated in the Twitter activity that was embedded to their English Listening and Speaking course curriculum for seven weeks. At the end the participants were given a bilingual questionnaire about their usage of and opinion on Twitter. Results indicated that the students had positive opinions with respect to communication in target language on Twitter and Twitter was found to be a suitable tool to train communicative and cultural competence anytime anywhere instead of face-to-face interaction.

According to the review of the studies on Twitter use in foreign language teaching and learning, Aydın (2014) states that Twitter can be used as an educational tool to enhance collaborative language learning, reading and writing skills. On the other hand, Twitter has also been reported as having some drawbacks regarding cyberbullying, sharing inappropriate content and violent content (Butler, 2010; Manzo, 2009).

The Purpose of the Study

The intend of this quantitative research is to find out the learners' perceptions of Twitter use in EFL learning process at School of Foreign Languages at Anadolu University, Turkey. As a foreign language context, students do not have many opportunities to be exposed to English outside the classroom. For this reason, Twitter can be considered to have potential for the students to practice their foreign language skills as an extra curricular activity. On this basis, this research intends to seek for an answer for the following research question:

> What are the students' general opinions of Twitter activity in their language learning process?

METHODOLOGY

Participants

Participants were chosen among 1400 intensive language program students who were placed in 98 classes and 4 different proficiency levels (beginner, elementary, preintermediate, intermediate) by Anadolu University School of Foreign Languages (AUSFL) Placement Test. The students were from various departments of different faculties at Anadolu University. Their ages varied from 18 to 24. The language program they enrolled at AUSFL follows an integrated skills content-based curriculum for 24 hours each week for 16 weeks. 100 students in 4 classes were chosen randomly according to convenience for the Twitter activity. Two of these classes were from elementary level and two of them were from pre-intermediate level. Language proficiency was not a variable of the study. Participation was on voluntary basis and 90 of the students responded the questionnaire asking their opinions on Twitter activity.

Instrument

A questionnaire consisting of 4 open-ended questions asking learners' participation, satisfaction, problems, and recommendations about Twitter activity was created by the researchers. To ensure the appropriateness and comprehensibility of the questionnaire items, 2 instructors were consulted. The questionnaire included the following questions:

- Did you participate in the Twitter activity?
- > Were you satisfied with the activity? If yes, in what ways did you find it satisfactory?
- > Did you experience any problems during the activity? If yes, please identify them.
- > Could you share your recommendations, if any, regarding the future possible application of the Twitter activity?

Procedure

Twitter activity in this study was applied as an extra-curricular activity throughout 4 weeks. The activity was introduced to the students with posters in order to motivate them to tweet their posts. Each week three different hot topics either determined by the class teachers or by students themselves were posted on school's Twitter account. The students were supposed to text their tweets about each topic every week. Some of the tweets written by the students for the topics of each week and some sample posters prepared for each week are provided in the appendices (please see Appendix 1 for posters and 2 for examples of tweets).

Some of the topics can be presented as follows:

- How do you think men and women are different?
- > What does 'republic' mean to you?
- > What is your motto in life?
- > Dear Ataturk, I miss you so much because....
- > What are you thankful for?

By this way they got the chance of getting into interaction both with the teachers and their peers. The content of the study had no relation with the curriculum. It was an extracurricular activity. The participants were given the questionnaire at the end of the four-week Twitter application. They answered the questions during the regular class hour.

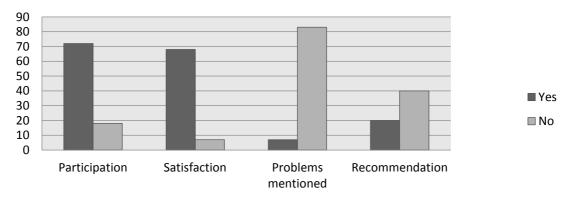
Data Analysis

The questionnaire consisting of questions about participants' evaluation of the Twitter activity in relation to their language learning process provided the data. Content analysis of the data was carried out independently by the researchers using Constant Comparison Method (Glaser, 1992). For the first, second and third questions, the frequencies of yes/no answers were calculated. For the second, third and fourth questions, all

responses given for the open-ended parts of each question were listed and given a number. Two copies of the list were given to the researchers. The researchers separately coded the idea units out of the lists. After that, the researchers compared the resultant labels. The responses were discussed, and labels were assigned only when agreement was reached. Meanwhile, the data were reanalyzed continually in the light of emerging labels. After that, all resultant labels were tabulated with the frequencies.

RESULTS

The participants in four classes each with 25 students were introduced with the Twitter activity. 90 students responded the questionnaire designed to gather their perceptions of using Twitter in facilitating their language learning experiences. The analyses revealed variation in the total number of answers for each question because some participants did not answer some of the questions (see Figure 1 for number of participants for each question).



Number of Participants for Each Question

Figure 1. Total number of participants for each question

The first question sought an answer for their participation in the activity. Of these 90 students, 72 (76%) stated that they actively participated in the Twitter activity. On the other hand, 18 students (20%) stated that they did not participate in the activity. When asked for the reasons in the questionnaire, the answers varied across personal and activity based reasons. Not taking the activity seriously, not believing that using Twitter and writing messages with a limited vocabulary will help their language proficiency, not being motivated to participate in extracurricular activities, being against the use of Twitter for academic purposes, privacy issues and personal space concerns, having no interest in social media were among the reasons behind their unwillingness to participate in the activity. The learners pointed out uninteresting topics and the frequency of the topics as the activity based reasons.

The second question was about their ideas regarding the learners' satisfaction of the activity. 68 students put forward that they were happy with the activity, while 7 of them did not find it satisfactory. The third question asked for the possible problems that they encountered during the activity. 55 of them stated that they did not encounter any problems during the activity, whereas 9 of them mentioned that they had some problems. The final question asked for their recommendations for the next possible application of this activity. 40 students stated that they would repeat the activity in the same way, while 20 students made some recommendations including using different social networking sites (11) or using Twitter with some modifications (9).

The second question revealed learners' satisfaction with the activity. 68 participants who found the activity satisfying stated 198 responses regarding why they thought the

activity was satisfying. Data analysis revealed 5 labels regarding the value they gave to the activity (see Figure 2 for the satisfaction labels).

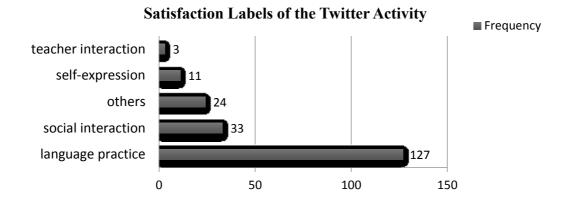


Figure 2. Satisfaction labels of the Twitter activity

The most frequent labels identified from the answers included practicing language with 127 responses (64.1%) and interacting with others with 33 responses (16.6%). The label of others included creating an environment which facilitates a sincere atmosphere with interesting tasks and which allows using casual language with a fast thinking process. This label was indicated with 24 responses (12.1%) and self-expression that is finding it easy to express themselves through Twitter received 11 responses (5.6%). Finally, being able to interact with their teachers outside the classroom was indicated as a positive point in 3 students' responses. Analysis of the responses in language practice label, which stands out by landslide among the other satisfaction labels, revealed subgroups that classify language learning areas and skills. Vocabulary comes at the top of the list with 49.6 %, followed by grammar with 23.6%, writing with 14.1%, reading with 7.8% and finally speaking with 4.7% (see Figure 3 for emerging subgroups of language practice label).



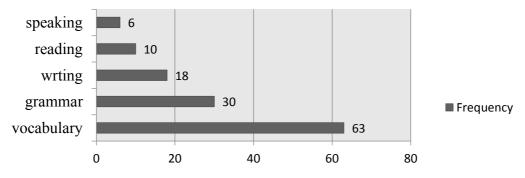
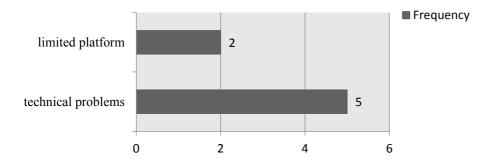


Figure 3. Emerging subgroups of language practice label

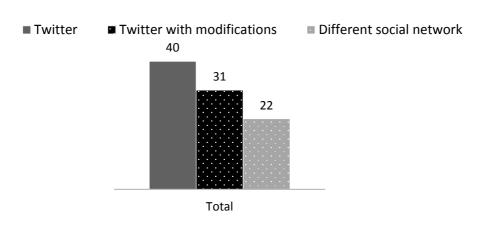
The third question revealed the problems students encountered during the Twitter activity. Among 90 students 83 of them stated that they did not encounter any problems. Only 7 students mentioned 7 responses related to problems they experienced and these responses revealed 2 labels indicating the problems they faced (see Figure 4 for problems encountered).



Encountered Problems During the Twitter Activity

Figure 4. Problems that students encountered during the Twitter activity.

The final question asked for students' recommendations regarding the next possible application of the Twitter activity. Data analysis revealed that students' recommendations could be grouped into 3 main categories; as using Twitter without any change as it is in the current activity, using Twitter with some modifications, and using a totally different social media. Among 93 responses 40 of them (43%) put forward that they would repeat the activity with no change. 31 responses (33.3%) stated that there should be some changes with the current activity. 22 responses (23.6%) recommended completely different social networking sites. (see Figure 5 for recommendations).

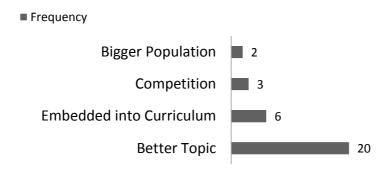


Recommendations for the Next Application

Figure 5. Recommendations for the next application.

Those who suggested modifications with the activity stated 31 responses, which were grouped into 2 labels. The most frequent responses were giving better topics with 20 responses (64.5%) and having a better format with 11 responses (35.4%) (see Figure 6 for the responses related to modifications of the activity).

Twitter with Modifications





Those who recommended completely different social networking sites revealed 22 responses, which were grouped under 5 labels. The most frequent label was a different social network other than Twitter with 15 responses (68.1%), followed by Instagram with 3 responses (13.6%), and Snapchat with 2 responses (9%) (see Figure 7 for the recommended social networking sites).

Recommendations for Different Social Networks

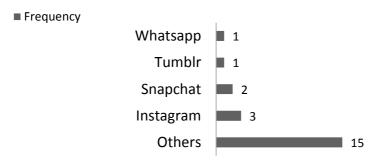


Figure 7. Recommendations for different social networks

DISCUSSION

A high population (80%) of the students actively participated in the Twitter activity even if it was not embedded into the curriculum, or it was not used as a part of assessment, which is similar to the finding of Johnson's (2015) study. This might give a clue about the students' motives towards extracurricular activities even if they are not evaluated with grades. Similar to the findings of Dogoriti & Pange's study (2015) study in which 85% of the EFL students found the use of Twitter interesting and 75 % of them found Twitter motivating, 76% of the students in this study stated that they found the activity quite beneficial in terms of motivation, engagement and communication. This is a finding, which might show the motivating effect of Twitter as a social networking site for the language learners, as stated by Greenhow, Robelia and Hughes "a social networking website does not work as a technical platform for students to learn new theories or horn their skills in English as a second language, rather, it works as a motivational platform" (2009). On the other hand, as also pointed out by Parry and Young (2010) and Minocha (2009), some students prefer to use social networking sites for social purposes, not for educative ones; some of the students in this study expressed similar concerns and preferred not to disclose academic and social spaces.

In this study 76% of the students found the activity satisfying and stated they benefited from the activity in various ways, which is also supported by literature on micro blogging (e.g. Borau et al., 2009; De Larreta-Azelain, 2013; DeSchryver et al., 2009; Holcomb, Brady and Smith, 2010; McCann, 2009; Mork, 2009; Schroeder and Grenbowe, 2009). Tweeting is known to be providing language practice that encourages students to participate in many language-learning skills such as reading, writing, listening and representing (Castrillo de Larreta-Azelain, 2013; Johnson, 2015; Mills & Chandra, 2011; Crews and Stitt-Gohdes, 2012; Yunus, Salehi & Chenzi; 2012). This is supported with the findings of this study with the highest-ranking responses with 64.1% being related to language skills in general and specific language learning areas such as grammar and vocabulary. Even if literature on the use of Twitter in foreign language classes reveals findings related to fostering writing skill mostly (e.g. Antenos-Conforti, 2009; Cheng, 2012; Kurtz, 2009), in this study writing with 14.1% did not seem to be drawing as much attention as vocabulary with 49.6 % and grammar with 23.6%. Little emphasis was given to vocabulary gain through the use of Twitter in the literature; however, in this study vocabulary took place on the top of the list. This might indicate that the participants tended to search for new vocabulary items in order to make their tweets more recognizable or to convey their messages in the most effective way. This might help them not only learn new words but also use them actively in their own sentences. By doing so, they could develop their dictionary use skills as they mentioned in their responses. The students tend to value Twitter activity mostly because it contributes to their language learning process. Apart from language skills, creating a social community in which the students are actively engaged in sharing ideas and meeting each other seems to be another important finding related to Twitter's positive impact on communicative competence and social interaction. With the high percentage of social interaction gains that the participants pointed out, the study has similar results with the literature about positive effects of Twitter use on communicative competence and social interaction (e.g. Antenos-Conforti, 2009; Borau et al. 2009; Gao, Luo, and Zhang 2012; Yunus, Salehi & Chenzi; 2012). Participants' responses pointed out that Twitter is not perceived as a tool merely for practicing the target language but accepted as a tool using the target language for real purposes in real situations. Having the opportunity to use English for real purposes for social interaction, self-expression, sharing ideas, meeting new people, Twitter's being an extracurricular activity, having chance to use casual language are all among the responses which support how Twitter enhances communicative competence and social interaction.

The third question in the questionnaire asked about the possible problems they encountered. Majority of the participants stated that they did not encounter any problems during the activity. Only a small number of students experienced technical problems related to Internet connection, not having a computer outside the school and they thought that Twitter is a limited platform to communicate their ideas thoroughly. As this is the case, Twitter seems to be a feasible medium to use in language learning context with almost no problems. However, giving students technical support to encourage their participation seems to be inevitable.

71 out of 93 responses revealed that students would like to participate in such a micro blogging activity either in the same format (43%), or with slight changes (33.3%). This is a finding supported by the relevant literature (e.g. De Larreta-Azelain, 2013). Some of the recommendations involved adding audio prompts, visual prompts, and adding spoken production as an extension to the given prompts. A good example that meets the spoken production recommendation can be found in Johnson's (2015) study, which enables students to record their voices and to upload the recording on Twitter discussion threads. In this way they could listen to each other's comments. Some participants suggested that the activity could have been embedded into curriculum and done in the classroom. This might indicate that since the learners enjoyed the activity, they wanted to have it as a part of their language program and gain higher academic success out of it. Apart from

making modifications on Twitter activity, some participants recommended completely different social networking sites. Those who recommended different social networks such as Instagram, Snapchat or WhatsApp found Twitter a limited platform to convey their messages effectively. Other social networking sites might be used as alternatives to let the students share their ideas without word limitation and also to provide videoconferencing feature in which they can chat with their peers and teachers as well.

CONCLUSION

The results of this study reveal mostly positive attitudes of students towards the use of Twitter in EFL context. Although participation in the activity was voluntary and it was not evaluated for their academic achievement, learners sent messages and liked doing so as an extracurricular activity. The main reason for Turkish students' satisfaction was practicing the foreign language outside the classroom, and especially learning vocabulary. Twitter's limitation to express themselves within 140 characters, seems to lead them to more interactive and quick discussions. As argued by Vygotsky, the social aspect of using Twitter in creating the opportunity for interacting with the other students and the teacher seems to have a positive impact on the students' language learning process. It can be concluded that writing responses to each other's messages created the social environment in which learners learned from each other and facilitated their peers' learning. For some, being able to express themselves was easier through this platform. It can be reported that incorporating Twitter activities into EFL teaching and learning context has countless benefits for students. Many EFL writing, listening, vocabulary, and research activities could be initiated and incorporated through Twitter because it could improve students' written communication skills as well as their analytical, collaborative, and social networking and interaction skills (Mork, 2009).

The students believe that Twitter not only supports their writing skills but also it contributes to their language learning process as a whole. Including extracurricular activities using technology might be suggested as a result of this study. Providing variety for the students in terms of language, topic as well as the technical platform seems to be essential in increasing the effectiveness of the activity, catering for individual differences.

Limitations and Suggestions for Further Study

Despite the care given to the all steps of the study, it has still some limitations. Firstly, because of the small scale of the study, the generalizability of the results is questionable. For the further research on Twitter use in EFL context the population could be extended to make more valid conclusions. Also, the Twitter activity lasted for four weeks. It would have been more fruitful if it had lasted during the semester. Finally, this study sheds light on one specific context and it has also conducted only once. More than 100 social media are being used for language learning and educational purposes (Centre for Learning and Performance Technologies, 2012). The high number and the variety of the social media use do not prove the effectiveness of these media used in language learning courses. For this reason, more studies need to be conducted to detect the effectiveness of these social media to get deeper understanding of their possible effects. One more suggestion for further studies can be exploring the effect of use of Twitter when embedded into curriculum. To what extent the students' perceptions and participation levels vary according to its being evaluated as a part of curriculum can also be explored.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1

Posters used to introduce each week's topic



Appendix 2 Sample tweets of the students

