

Dixie Dixit: New Trends with Technology

Using Twitter to Teach Vocabulary

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Vocabulary is one of the most important elements in learning a new language. Having a wide vocabulary helps students understand a written or spoken text. It also helps them express their own ideas more efficiently.

Reading general texts, for example, requires a vocabulary of at least the two thousand most commonly used words in a language, whereas reading academic texts requires around four times more than that. A person requires between five and seven thousand words to be able to speak a language fluently.

Thus, it can be seen that learning vocabulary is one of the most important activities for language learners. However, many teachers complain that it's hard to devote class time to teaching vocabulary, since they already have to concentrate on grammar, reading, writing, listening, and speaking activities.

A few years ago, I was doing a study on the use of technology in language classes. During the course of that study, I was working with two groups of students who were taking a TOEIC preparation course. The TOEIC exam has a very strong focus on vocabulary, so to help the students learn more, I asked them to give me their cell phone numbers. This was on a voluntary basis, but I collected approximately 30 numbers. This was in the days before smart phones, but the mobile I had at the time could be connected to my computer. I could type in the list of numbers on the computer, plus a message, and send it to multiple receivers easily.

What I did at that time was to send a daily vocabulary word its definition and an example. The results were very satisfactory. Students were thrilled to receive their word a day, and they proved to be able to use the words correctly on a later exam. The only problem was that it was very expensive to send so many daily messages. That's when I got the idea of using Twitter.

In case you are not familiar with Twitter, it is an online microblogging site. You can open a free account and use it to send short messages, known as "tweets". You can sign up to follow people or organizations, or ask people to sign up and follow you. When you write a tweet, it appears on your followers' list of messages. There is a Twitter application for mobile phones, so you can receive these messages on your device. The communications are mostly public- that is, everyone on your list of followers can see them. You can send private messages, but this is not the most important function of Twitter.

Considering my previous successful experience with mobile phones, I decided to use Twitter as a vehicle to deliver a daily vocabulary word to students, thinking it might be successful.

Before I tell you more about my experiment, let's talk about how vocabulary is learned.

When we talk about “knowing” a word, we mean recognizing it in written or spoken form in its diverse forms: singular, plural for nouns; present, past for verbs, etc. We also mean being able to use it correctly in spoken or written communication.

Learning vocabulary requires three steps. The first of these is noticing. Learners must notice that a word is new for them, and that it may be useful. Then, the learner tries to understand the meaning of the word, either by asking someone, by looking in a dictionary, by trying to guess the meaning, etc.

The next step in learning vocabulary is retrieval, or recovering the word from memory. Imagine that I am using flash cards to teach vocabulary. Typically, I will show the new word, with a picture. Let’s say the new word is *cup*. I will show a picture of a cup, accompanied by the word *cup*. I will show it to the students and say “Cup. Repeat: Cup”. After a few repetitions, I will say, “Now, I show you the picture, and you say the word”. This is the retrieval stage: the students see the picture and retrieve the word from their memory.

The third step is creative or generative processing. Here, a previously learned word is seen or used in a different way. For example, the students know cup, then they learn cup of coffee, or coffee cup, or teacup, etc.

With this information, plus my previous experience, I decided to use Twitter to deliver a daily vocabulary word to students. I “borrowed” advanced English students from my university and I divided them into an experimental group and a control group. The experimental group had 109 students and the control group had 74 students. They were approximately 60% female and 40% male, and predominantly from fourth and sixth semesters. They were from different areas of study- Engineering, Administration, etc.

The vocabulary was taken from Coxhead’s Academic Word List. This is a list of 570 words that are not among the most common words in English. I eliminated the most obvious cognate words and made a pilot test. From the pilot, I eliminated the words that most students got right. Then, I created a multiple choice test of 100 items and applied the test to the students in both groups.

After that, I asked the students in the experimental group to sign up to follow me on Twitter. I sent one word a day, including the definition, an example, and a picture, from Monday to Friday, from January to May.

Here is an example:



In May, I tested the students again to see if there was any difference in test results between the students who received the Twitter words and those who did not. To make a long story short, there was no difference. Twitter did not help students learn more effectively.

Why was the mobile phone experiment successful, but not the Twitter experiment? I believe it has to do with the number of messages students are receiving daily, through various chat or messaging applications.

I think that Twitter can be useful, but it may be necessary to send the messages more than once daily, to ensure students get them, and to retrieve them in some way in the classroom.

I'm interested in trying the experiment again. If anyone wants to participate, drop me a line and I can include your students.

Further Reading

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