

IMPROVING CREATIVE WRITING SKILLS OF EFL LEARNERS THROUGH MICROBLOGGING

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Abstract: Online network technologies have begun to be used more in education domain due to opportunities they provide. Social Network Sites (SNSs) have become very popular and used as an educational medium. Within this perspective, the purpose of this paper is to investigate Social Network Sites in general and microblogging platforms in particular in terms of improving creative writing skills of EFL learners. For the purposes of the research, an explanatory sequential mixed methods design was employed. Quantitative data was examined through Social Network Analysis (SNA) and qualitative data was analyzed through content analysis. Research findings revealed that microblogging services, namely Twitter in this context, support creative writing activities can be used as a learning platform for EFL learners.

Keywords: English as a foreign language, creative writing skills, microblogging, social network analysis, content analysis

INTRODUCTION

Social media and Web have provided new opportunities in many aspects of the life and have changed our lives drastically. This change is called *Renaissance 2.0*. Accordingly, in a technology centric world, *Renaissance 2.0* reasoned a new kind of species called *Homo Iunctus*, who lives in a connected world and forms a superior connected being. *Homo Iunctus* inhabits on Web and Web functions as a *digital nest* where *Homo Iunctus* explore, discover and learn (Bozkurt, 2014). It is for sure that the paradigm shift emerged with digital technologies also affected generations whose perception of the life is strongly related to digital technologies.

DIGITAL GENERATION

It has been argued that the digital age is here, the net generation has arrived and therefore we should meet the future (Tapscott, 2008). Digitally grown up generations have different characteristics than previous generations (Tapscott, 1999; Howe and Strauss, 1991, 2000; Prensky 2001a, 2001b; Oblinger and Oblinger, 2005; Palfrey and Gasser, 2008; Jorgensen, 2003) because today's generation of young people have been immersed in a world infused with networked and digital technologies (Jones and Shao, 2011). The relationship among digital generations, technology and learning is explained with a metaphor which indicates the possibilities of digital knowledge age. Accordingly, Web 2.0, with all its attributes, appears to be a promising learning medium for the generations in digital knowledge age. It seems that digital generations followed the *white rabbit* and discovered *the Wonderland* in our networked globe. In this discovery, Web 2.0 represents the *Wonderland* with many opportunities as well as many challenges (Bozkurt, 2014). In addition to the many characteristics of Web 2.0, one thing that is salient is integration and use of online social networks by digital generations which caught much attention by educators because of the features they have.

ONLINE SOCIAL NETWORKS

Online social network sites are defined as “web-based services that allow individuals to construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system; articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and view and traverse their list of connections and

those made by others within the system” (Boyd and Ellison, 2007; p.211). There is a distinction between SNSs and other types of computer-mediated communications because in SNSs, profiles are publicly viewed, friends are publicly articulated, and comments are publicly visible (Ahmad, 2011). Considering that learning is a social process, this distinction can be interpreted as a strength of the SNSs.

Presently, there are many popular and widely used online social network sites such as Facebook and Twitter. However, Twitter is examined in the scope of this research with an assumption that it facilitates creative writing due to restricted message length.

TWITTER: THE BLUE BIRD FOR MICROBLOGGING

Twitter, launched in 2006, is one of the online social networking services and microblogging platforms. Twitter is mostly known for its restrictions to limit a tweet (short message) to 140 characters. A tweet can contain text, visuals, videos and hyperlinks to enrich the message. Tweets can additionally contain timestamps and geolocation data. Twitter allows its users to create a profile and to subscribe other users by following them. Users can create a bio, upload a profile photo, a cover photo and link an URL to create a profile. Bio is a short description limited to up to 140 characters and used to introduce users to other followers.

Users can send direct message (DM: Direct Message is a private message which is also limited to 140 characters), use @ to mention a specific user and use # to refer, tag or categorize a specific topic. Registered users can read and post tweets while unregistered users can only read tweets. Users can favorite a message to indicate that they liked the tweet, or retweet (RT) to spread the message or reply to tweets. Real time tweet stream is shown through timeline and users can also follow trends which can be a topic or hashtag determined algorithmically to be one of the most popular on Twitter at that moment. Search box allows users to search the current conversations. Discover section surfaces personalized content tailored to users’ interests. Twitter uses a bird logo (The mountain bluebird) which highlights its feature for crowd sourcing and word/bird of mouth. The bird logo represents freedom, hope and limitless possibility and highlights the importance of flocking with other birds to achieve a common purpose.

MICROBLOGGING IN EFL CLASSES

Microblogging can foster process-oriented learning due to the fact that it can allow continuous and transparent communication between students and lecturers (Ebner, Lienhardt, Rohs and Meyer, 2010) and they are used for teaching and learning activities in EFL classes successfully (Yunus, Salehi and Chenzi, 2012). Accordingly, there are three factors behind the success of Weblogs: Usability, collaboration and personality (Ebner and Schiefner, 2008):

- It is easy to blog (Usability): No special skills are necessary to create a new contribution
- It makes fun (Collaboration): People connect with each other, discuss topics they are interested in
- It belongs to me (Personality): Contributions are written from a subjective perspective. The own opinion can be published and reflects the own thoughts and feelings.

The basic difference between blogging and microblogging is the length of the messages (Java, Song, Finin and Tseng, 2007; Greenhow and Gleason, 2012). Compared to regular blogging, microblogging fulfills a need for an even faster mode of communication. By encouraging shorter posts, it lowers users’ requirement of time and thought investment for content generation. The second important difference is the frequency of update. On average, a prolific

blogger may update her blog once every few days; on the other hand, a microblogger may post several updates in a single day. (Java, Song, Finin and Tseng, 2007). Considering Twitter's features, it is argued that it is a viable platform for creative writing.

ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE (EFL) IN DIGITAL AGE

English is lingua franca of the globe and World Wide Web (Bozkurt and Ataizi, 2015) and one the most demanded language to learn. Since the early 1960s, dramatic changes have been witnessed in the ways that languages are taught (Kern and Warschauer, 2000). Firstly, computer assisted language learning and then network based language learning emerged as the innovative approaches to learn or acquire a language because integrating technology in language teaching/learning has numerous outstanding advantages both for the learners and the teachers (Aydın, 2014) and have great opportunities to improve language skills and areas (Morgan, 2012; Aydın, 2014).

In English language, there are four skills and two areas (Figure 1). Reading, writing, listening and speaking are the basic skills needed to communicate in target language. These skills are not isolated from each other; they all facilitate learning all together and have an interchangeable relationship. Grammar and vocabulary are the areas needed to improve language skills and to use target language more effectively and appropriately. All four skills and two areas are necessary for using language and developing language proficiency (Bozkurt and Ataizi, 2015). However, this research will focus on writing skill as it requires active engagement of the learners during as a productive skill.

BLOOM'S DIGITAL TAXONOMY

It is important to combine technology and pedagogy, which is called as *pedagogy 2.0* (Bozkurt, 2014). In effort to meet this need, Bloom's Taxonomy (Bloom, 1956) was updated for 21st century learners and emerging learning paradigms by Anderson and Krathwohl (2001). Churches (2008) updated it again for 21st century digital skills and added new action verbs to point how technology use is related to relevant skills. Accordingly, *remembering*, *understanding*, and *applying* are lower order skills while *analyzing*, *evaluating* and *creating* are higher order skills. In this taxonomy, creating is the most advanced skill in our digital age. Among the language skills, reading and listening are receptive skills facilitated through inputs, while speaking and writing are productive skills that can be observed through produced outputs. Within this perspective, though all the skills are important and interrelated with each other, writing is one of the most important skill as it requires employing more cognitive processes. On this ground, writing skill with creative output purposes poses as an important skill for EFL learners.

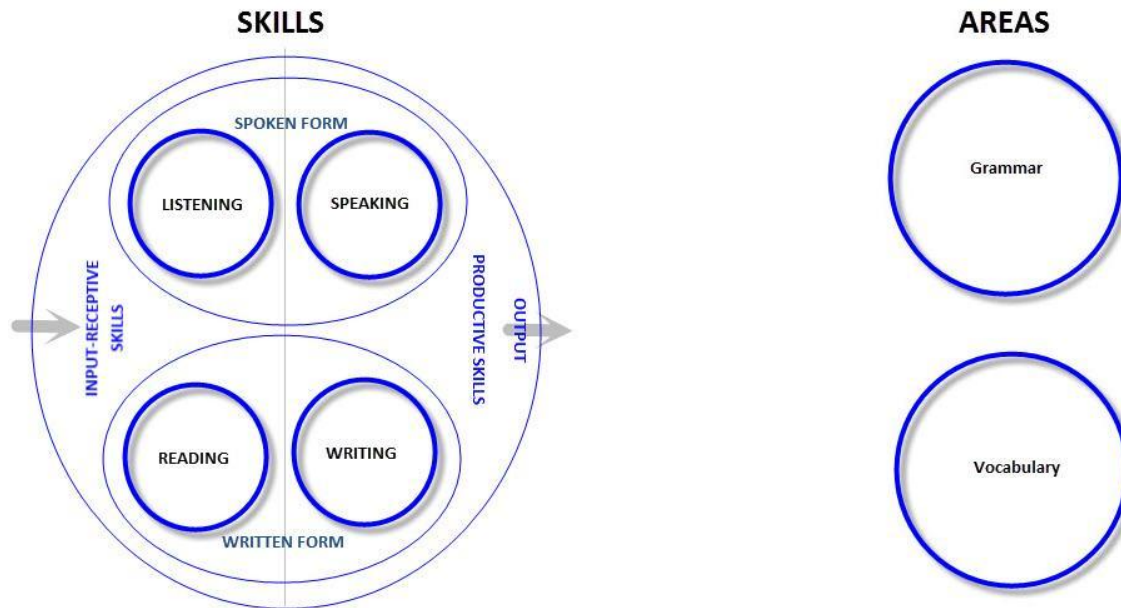


Figure 1. Language skills and areas (Bozkurt and Ataizi, 2015)

CREATIVE WRITING SKILLS

Creativity is difficult to define and a universal definition remains elusive. However, common words associated with creativity affirm that it concerns novelty and originality. Creative writers' surface original ideas through constructing their own creative texts and can generate novel responses and multiple interpretations (Fraser, 2006). On this basis, how does twitter help to improve creative writing skill?

Microblogging services, such as Twitter, are a way for improving creative writing skills as it limits the length of the sentence(s) and as it doesn't require advance proficiency in language (Bozkurt and Ataizi, 2015). Due to the imposed restriction on the message length, Twitter users learn how to express their ideas or questions clearly, concisely and articulately (Dunlap and Lowenthal, 2009; Dhir, Buragga and Boreqqah, 2013) and the use of Twitter fosters writing, comprehension, reading, and even critical thinking because users learn how to write effectively and address a large audience of people properly (Ebner et al., 2010; Dhir, Buragga and Boreqqah, 2013). In sum, the constraint in tweets requires brainstorming and ends up with creativity.

BITE-SIZED, MICRO LEARNING THROUGH KNOWLEDGE BYTES

Originally explained by George A. Miller in his eminent article "The Magical Number Seven, Plus or Minus Two: Some Limits on Our Capacity for Processing Information", bite-sized learning is about designing learning contents in chunks considering working memory and its capacity.

The terms knowledge bytes, bite-sized or micro learning refer to the same thing in essence. It means that learning content can be segmented into meaningful chunks. Thus, learners can grasp the content quickly, manage, consume, digest, understand and then remember easily. It is a solution for distracted learners' of 21st century who have shrinking attention spans. From the same point of view, yet a contrast angle, not only delivering bite-sized content, but also creating it can be an effective strategy to improve creative writing skills. It is believed that

learners should produce as much as they consume and should be active participants of the learning process.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The general purpose of this study is to investigate a microblogging platform's potential for EFL students in terms of improving creative writing skills. We further examine interaction patterns of such an implementation within social network analysis (SNA) and additionally examine content produced by the participants and reveal their thoughts. On this basis, this research intends to seek for an answer for the following research questions:

- Are microblogging platforms effective for creative writing practices?
- What are the pros and cons of micro blogging platforms in terms of creating writing practices?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

Based on the purposes of the research, an explanatory sequential mixed methods design was employed to analyze research findings. Explanatory sequential design consists of first collecting quantitative data and then collecting qualitative data to help explain or elaborate on the quantitative results. The rationale for this approach is that the quantitative data and results provide a general picture of the research problem; more analysis, specifically through qualitative data collection, is needed to refine, extend, or explain the general picture (Creswell, 2004). For quantitative data collection (1st phase), SNA and for qualitative data collection (2nd phase) content analysis and interview techniques were employed.

SNA provides powerful ways to map, summarize and visualize networks and identify key vertices that occupy strategic locations and positions within the matrix of links (Hansen, Shneiderman and Smith, 2010). In SNA, networks are usually visualized in a social network diagram, where nodes are represented as points and edges are represented as lines to conceptualize and to analyze them (Bozkurt et al., 2015). Content analysis is a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from data to their context (Rrippendorff, 1980) and measuring the amount of something in a representative sampling (Berger 1991).

Sampling

The sample of this research in quantitative phase is 91 English prep students from Anadolu University, School of Foreign Languages who participated a four-week creative writing competition on Twitter. The demographics of the students are limited because the data was pulled from a micro-blogging platform. However, it is known that learners come from diverse academic backgrounds and they are the first year students who attend to English preparatory course in School of Foreign Languages. The sample of qualitative phase is a total of 5854 tweets and 2 students who participated creative writing competition and volunteered to join a semi-structured interview.

Procedure

The Twitter competition for creative writing is conducted at Anadolu University, School of Foreign Languages in spring 2015 term. The competition was promoted through Twitter account of institution. The participants were required to be a student at School of Foreign Languages and the participation was voluntary. Twitter competition lasted four weeks with different themes for each week determined based on the curriculum followed. Participants used #anadoluprep hashtag to join the competition. The winners of the first three weeks were

the students who tweeted the most and the winner of the last week was the student who tweeted the best tweet for each four weeks. The themes used for each week are as follows:

1. How do you think men and women are different?
2. If I had a second chance to live... I would/wouldn't...
3. How will the world change in 3000s?
4. The best place in Eskişehir after school is... because...

Strengths and Limitations

The implementation was completely online and all network data were collected. In other words, SNA represents all network interactions. In addition to strength of this research, there are some limitations. For instance, it is observed that some students tweeted for the sake of being winner of the week rather than joining to improve their English Language.

Data Sources and Analysis

1st Phase: For quantitative data analysis, SNA was conducted according to following algorithms and metrics. In the directed graph, the graph's vertices were grouped by cluster using the Clauset-Newman-Moore cluster algorithm. The graph was laid out using the Harel-Koren Fast Multiscale layout algorithm. The edge colors, widths, and opacities are based on edge weight values. The vertex sizes are based on betweenness centrality values. The vertex opacities are based on degree values.

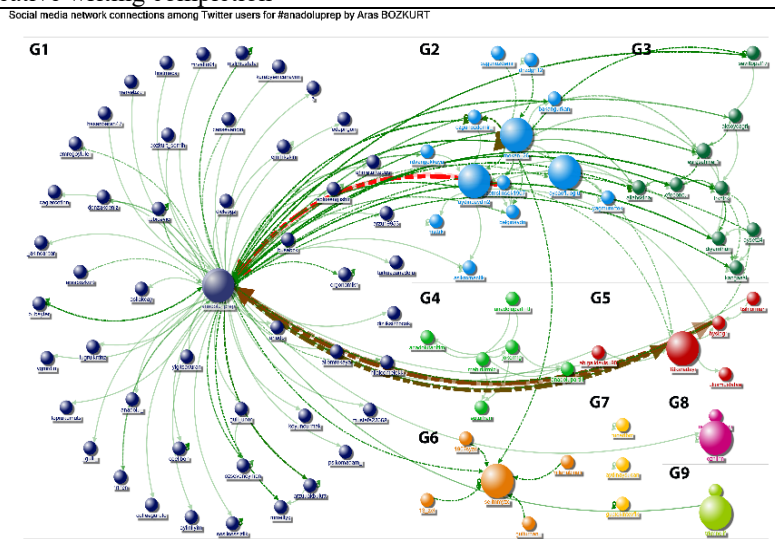
2nd phase: For qualitative data analysis, content analysis was used. Content analysis includes two types of data. First, the textual data of tweets collected through SNA and secondly spoken data recorded through semi-structured interviews with two participants who had high betweenness centrality values during the four-week creative writing competition.

FINDINGS

1st Phase (SNA): A total of 91 EFL learners posted 5769 tweets. The statistics and sociogram are given in Table1. Three students out of 91 didn't engage in other learners except tweeting (G7). In some components (sub-networks), connected/unified communities were observed (G2, G3, G4, G5, and G6). In G1 in which institution's twitter account can be seen in the middle, out-hub & spoke support network formation was observed. Interestingly, the vertices in G1 didn't interact with each other and only engaged with institution's Twitter account.

Table 1. Social Network Analysis of creative writing completion

Vertices:	94
Unique Edges:	85
Edges with Duplicates:	5769
Total Edges:	5854
Self-Loops:	1264
Connected Components:	5
Single-Vertex Components:	3
Max. Vertices in a Connected Component:	85
Max. Edges in a Connected Component:	5820
Max. Geodesic Distance (Diameter):	4
Average Geodesic Distance:	2,1663
Graph Density:	0,0308853
Modularity:	0,019205



Created with NodeXL (<http://nodexl.codeplex.com>) from the Social Media Research Foundation (<http://www.smfoundation.org>)

2nd Phase-A (Content analysis of tweets): Researchers of this article examined all the tweets in terms of creativity. According to the research findings, Twitter’s constraint in the length of the tweets force the EFL learners to produce creative writing. However, it is also observed that EFL learners usually ignored grammatical rules, in other words, EFL learners generally focused on function rather than form in terms of language use. Users mostly used emoticons to reflect their moods regarding to tweets. Some examples from 1st weeks’ tweets are given in Table 2.

Table 2. Tweet examples for creative writing (from week one, 1st theme/Tweets were quoted as they were)

-
- wo is the difference between them i.e. wo men = wisdom of (wo) men
 - Scientists say 'women learn foreign languages easier than men.' This is about women are men difference brain. #anadoluprep
 - If a man says no' this mean is no but if a woman says 'no', this means ask me again #anadoluprep
 - Women can focus on a few things at the same time but men can't #anadoluprep
 - Female love going shopping. In fact, she just goes windows shopping from morning to night. Male cannot stand for this situation #anadoluprep
 - Women feel men think. #anadoluprep
 - A woman has more shoes during her whole life than a man. Women love shoes. #anadoluprep
 - #anadoluprep If there is 3,99 Euro. Men see that like 4.00 Euro, women see that like 3,00 Euro :))))))
 - #anadoluprep women memorialize past, men live the moment.
 - #anadoluprep Men think simple for an event women produce millions of scenarios.
 - #anadoluprep A woman can cry for breaking her nail for hours but if man make an effort for hours he can't still understand her.
 - #anadoluprep men forget and forgive but women never forget and seem as forgiving.
 - #anadoluprep women mostly thinks emotional but man mostly thinks with sexual
 - #anadoluprep Women use 20.000 words and mimics in a day in order to communicate.
 - #anadoluprep Men use only 7000 words and gesture and facial expression in a day.
 - #anadoluprep There are maximum 5 cleaning materials in men's bath. Women’s bath remains incapable for her cleaning materials.
 - #anadoluprep @anadolu_prep Shopping and Chocolate: two magical word for women
 - #anadoluprep Man is a computer woman is the internet and they depend on each other
 - Money can buy everything that a man wants like a beautiful woman or a good car but can't buy what a woman wants. #anadoluprep
 - If woman screaming to you,still you have a chance to fix it. But if woman in silence, start worry about it #anadoluprep
 - #anadoluprep A woman will pay 1\$ for \$2 item that she doesn't need but it is only on sale.
 - Women spend much more money than men but some clothes deserve it. :(#anadoluprep
 - male babies walk around distracted, female babies most of the time they spend observing their surroundings. #anadoluprep
 - #anadoluprep Men and women may speak the same language, but we interpret words differently
 - #anadoluprep Women are like a gold. Men are like a wood. Because, Men never know Women’s value.
 - #anadoluprep men attack with his punch. Women attack with her words.
 - The difference between men and women. A woman thinks whole possibilities. #anadoluprep
-

2nd Phase-B (Content analysis of interviews):

The interviews revealed some interesting findings. First of all, interviewees reported that constraints in Twitter forced them to think about what they write and they paid more attention to word choice in addition to efforts for creative writing.

- “...I tried to use better adjectives... I improved my vocabulary and learnt new words while tweeting...”
- “I don’t have any idea regarding grammar, but I improved my vocabulary.”

Secondly, interviewees stated that they felt more motivated when creative tweets turned into conversations both with other EFL learners and instructors. It further helped for community formation by following each other.

- "...Commenting, mutual conversations are very important. It felt more like a dialogue [rather than a Twitter chat]"
- "There was a sudden increase in the numbers of my followers both from other participants in Twitter creative writing project and other followers from different networks. I really liked the idea that as I tweet my followers increased..."

Thirdly, interviewees highlighted the importance of the themes/topics for twitter. They stated that thought-provoking themes are more effective.

- "The first weeks' theme was great to debate, there was a great competition and sarcasm among participants."
- "The nature of the topic triggered mutual conversations..."
- "At the beginning, I was tweeting to be winner, but later I enjoyed the topic and realized that tweeting helped to improve my English..."

One of the interviewees also stated that in addition to writing creative tweets which can improve both creative writing and reading skill, recording small videos and sharing them with tweets can improve both speaking and listening skills.

- "We can tweet not only textual content but dynamic visuals such as videos... we can record, for example, ten second videos..."

The final interpretation was regarding participation of facilitators. In this research, facilitators of the twitter competition kept their presence to a minimum not to manipulate the process and see EFL learners' self-directed, self-regulated behavioral patterns. However, interviewees reported that the presence of the facilitator improved their motivation. However, researchers of this research want to stress that this issue can be related to cultural differences such as educational background and getting accustomed to teacher-centered education. On this basis, it is believed that this finding may change in different cultural settings and worth further investigation

- "it is not only about tweeting, but getting feedback from instructors in addition to other EFL learners are motivating..."

CONCLUSION

In this research, microblogging for creative writing activates was examined through an explanatory sequential mixed research design. Accordingly, microblogging services, such as twitter, support creative writing activities because the constraints in the length of the tweets force learners to be more selective for word choice and to be more creative to express themselves in a single tweet which requires more involvement during the learning process. Besides, these activities support vocabulary learning which is an important area in language learning. However, it is also found that while the consideration improves creativity and vocabulary, use of proper grammar is usually ignored by EFL learners.

There are also some lessons learnt for instructors, facilitators and teaching/learning designers. Networked interaction requires thought provoking stimulus. This kind of stimulus provides more participation and improves motivation to sustain engagement and enhances interactions within the learning network.

This study also showed that networked learning activates through social networks are convenient for interacting socially and forming community among the learners. Assuming that learning in general and language learning particular is a social process, these kind of activities should be integrated into curriculum to transform language learning beyond the

classrooms and to transform it into a daily activity in online social networks, which is generally perceived as a routine by digital generations.

This research also provided some insights regarding the use of multimedia to support writing skill of a language. It is thought that by employing textual content, writing primarily and reading skill at backchannel can be improved. However, integrating additional videos can support speaking skill primarily and listening skill at the back channel. Within a holistic perspective, the four skills are interrelated and designing these kind of learning activities can lead to effective, efficient and attractive learning opportunities for EFL learners.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Based on the findings of this research, the following future directions can be taken into consideration:

- Online networks have become a part of daily life, digital generations usually use these virtual/online networks as an extension of their physical life and they are thought to be a convenient environment for the learners (Bozkurt, Karadeniz and Okur, 2015). In this sense, there is a need for further research based on connectivist theory and rhizomatic learning related to language learning.
- Use of multimedia is an important component of e-learning and m-learning activities. However, researchers can examine how to design and use multimedia to improve four language skills.
- Became popular with m-learning, learning content for EFL learners as a knowledge byte or bite sized learning needs further research and design principles of this kind of content should be defined.

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