

## STARTING LIFELONG JAPANESE LEARNING VIA TWITTER TWITTER を使った漢字練習の試み

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### Background of the Project

Previous research on our campus confirmed that the majority of our students own mp3 players or other mobile devices, but most are not using these technologies to support their language studies. For example, of 349 students enrolled in language classes completing a survey during fall of 2008, 87% reported that they owned some type of mp3 player or mp3-capable mobile phone. Of these 87%, only 32% indicated that they used their devices for language learning. Nonetheless, these devices, which have been referred to as a “pocket” language lab (Sathe and Waltje, 2008), could allow students to engage in many of the same types of learning activities that institutions invested thousands of dollars in the past to provide equipment for: listening to, recording, and exchanging audio and even video files, interacting with native speakers, etc. A follow-up survey with students in Japanese classes showed that 45% of the students had never thought of using their mp3 player in this way, an additional 20% had thought of it but hadn't tried it yet, and 30% did not know how to do so. Only 15% reported that they did not think it would be useful.

As we undertook a case study in the Japanese department to explore how we might encourage students to make more effective use of “mobile-assisted language learning,” both while in college and throughout their lives, we asked students what types of learning strategies they were most interested in. Young (2007) suggests that educators focus on activities based on communication, interaction and collaboration: “Activities that are engaging, problem-solving, and task-based, and that encourage authentic self expression for a purpose, are more appealing than listening to mechanical discrete-point verb conjugations or prefabricated audio files” (p. 45). However, our students' responses indicated a surprisingly high level of interest in many of those more “mechanical” types of activities. For example, “Listen to vocabulary words and sentences” generated a mean interest level of 3.9 (on a scale of 1 = “no interest” to 5 = “very interested”), while “Create and record a radio program with classmates” earned an average interest of only 2.6. Being reluctant to encourage less-than-optimal learning conditions, we decided to try using Twitter, as suggested to us by one student: “I think it might be fun to connect with students in class via a webservice like Twitter. We could practice Japanese together in short little spurts.” The Japanese faculty felt that Twitter might also fulfill students' need for more exposure to the kanji studied in class.

### The Basics of Using Twitter

“Twitter” (<http://www.twitter.com>) is one example of a “microblogging” service: users post short messages (limited to a maximum 140 characters), like keeping an online

diary or journal with brief entries. Keeping with the avian theme, these messages are called “tweets;” the act of posting messages is referred to as “tweeting” or alternatively “twittering.” Twitter can also be considered a social networking service, as users can choose to “follow” each other. After creating a free account with Twitter, when you log in, you will see your timeline or feed, which displays all of your own tweets and the tweets of anyone you are following, in reverse chronological order. Other users can also browse your profile, which includes lists of everyone you are following and everyone who is following you. If you are followed by someone with whom you do not wish to be associated (spam is unfortunately a regular occurrence on Twitter as in email), you can choose to “block” that user, removing him/her from your follower list. (For more detailed information and instructions for getting started with Twitter, we refer you to Twitter's help documents located online at <http://twitter.com/help/start>. There are also numerous guides to Twitter created by users, which can be found by searching terms such as “Twitter how-to,” “Twitter step-by-step,” or “Twitter tutorial” with a search engine such as Google.)

It is important to keep in mind that your tweets are essentially public; they could be found and read by anyone searching Twitter or even through search engines such as Google. (It is possible to “protect” your Twitter account, so that only users you approve can view your tweets; however, that would negate what we believe to be one of the major benefits of using Twitter for language learning; see further discussion below.) In addition, your Twitter account includes a number of settings that you should review carefully: Do you want to use your real first and last name, or perhaps a nickname? Do you want to turn on “location services,” allowing your current location to be added to each of your tweets? Despite their apparent facility with all things digital, our students may be woefully naïve about privacy concerns; as educators, we believe that it is our responsibility when integrating a public web service like Twitter into our courses to bring these issues to students' attention and to provide some guidance in safe practices.

Twitter users have developed a number of conventions to facilitate communication with each other. To reply to someone's tweet, you can direct your tweet “@” that user, i.e., by typing “@username” usually at the beginning of your tweet. On Twitter.com, there is a “Reply” button displayed after each tweet which automatically adds “@username” to the text box where you type your message (“username宛” is used in Japanese). Like other tweets, @ replies are public. To respond privately to another user, you can send a “direct message.” Twitter.com provides a link for direct messaging on the right side of the page, but you are only allowed to direct message users who are following you. If you see a tweet that you find particularly interesting, you can “retweet” it, thus sharing it with all of your followers. Again, Twitter.com provides a “Retweet” button, but retweeting can also be done manually by typing “RT @username” and copying the other user's message. Finally, tags are used to facilitate tracking of specific topics. Tags are included in tweets by adding the hash or pound symbol (#) to the beginning of any word. The word can be a part of your message or isolated at the beginning or end of your tweet:

langology RT @CASLS\_NFLRC: #Spanish teacher uses text messages as a way to practice the #language. 3:20 PM May 4<sup>th</sup> via web

mhc\_irc\_db See “Trümmerfrauen” (MHC students' entry in Deutsches Theaterfest 2010): [#German 3:33 PM May 6<sup>th</sup>](http://www.youtube.com/user/MHCLanguages) via web

Twitter.com automatically converts any tags in your tweets into clickable links that generate search results for all tweets including that tag. You can also search for tags using a search box . Groups using Twitter often designate a unique tag for all members to include in their tweets; any member can then search Twitter for this tag to generate a timeline of all of the group's tweets. For example, in our project, we chose the tag #mhcj, after searching Twitter to confirm that it was not already in use. We asked the faculty and students participating to include “#mhcj” in any tweets they wanted to share with the Japanese-learning community at Mount Holyoke College.

Users can choose a number of means through which to receive and post tweets, the simplest perhaps being to access <http://www.twitter.com> through an Internet browser on a personal computer or a mobile device. Alternatively, you can choose to associate your cell phone number with your Twitter account and then send and receive tweets as text messages (your cell phone carrier's text messaging rates apply). A third option is to install a third-party software for accessing Twitter on your personal computer or mobile device. Our 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> year Japanese classes were piloting the use of iPod Touches to assist their studies, so we loaded the free “IM+ Lite” app which enabled the students to access Twitter (and any other instant messaging accounts they might use) on the iPod through a wireless Internet connection. On campus computers, we use the Internet browser “Firefox,” and we found an advantage to our students for tweeting through Firefox was the availability of “Rikai-chan,” a free add-on tool which automatically performs a bilingual dictionary/character look up when the user moves her mouse over any Japanese text on the webpage.

### **Why Twitter for Lifelong Japanese Study?**

As a service designed for native speakers (of any language) to communicate with one another, Twitter offers language learners a unique opportunity for authentic communication through an authentic medium and interaction with authentic participants. At any given moment, there are users all over the world tweeting their thoughts and experiences in their preferred language of communication, including Japanese. Students may follow other users, including native speakers, who are tweeting in Japanese and who may even follow the students in turn. As most tweets are posted publicly, students may freely read anyone's tweets in Japanese and may reply if they choose. If a student tweets about a topic of interest to other Twitter users, she may find that they begin to follow her and may even send her a reply. Unlike almost any other context for communication with native speakers, no introduction or prior acquaintance is needed to initiate interaction. In Twitter culture, it is perfectly natural to follow someone you've never met, and it is even acceptable to reply to a stranger's tweets (although you may or may not receive any further response).

Another advantage of Twitter for language study is that it allows the learner to participate at whatever level and pace she is comfortable. In our project, the students could read tweets to develop their receptive language skills, however frequently or

infrequently they chose. If the student desired, she could also post her own tweets, practicing her productive language skills and providing more text for her peers to read. In this way, using Twitter is not necessarily an instructor-centered activity although from our initial experience, we have found that the involvement of the instructor can be very important in engaging and motivating the students to participate (see Discussion below). We hope that by providing a resource that allows the opportunity to make these choices, we are helping the students to further develop their autonomy as language learners and to take control of their language learning process.

Text length and frequency of exposure also seem like beneficial characteristics of Twitter for language acquisition. Because of the 140-character limit imposed on the length of Tweets, the messages are more accessible than other sources of text for learners who are developing their reading skills, and the idea of composing such a short message is also seems less intimidating. (Nonetheless, tweeting in Japanese is, however, quite different from tweeting in English as 140 Japanese characters can convey significantly more content than 140 characters in English). On Twitter, users tend to tweet at sporadic intervals, so new messages may arrive in your timeline sometimes once per day, at other times perhaps more or less often, depending on the number of people you are following. For learners, that means that several times throughout the day, they may have an opportunity to take a few minutes to read a new, short text in Japanese. Thornton and Houser (2005) studied a similar strategy, in which they sent vocabulary “mini-lessons” to their students cell phones as text messages. They concluded that shorter and longer messages were equally as effective, but what was most successful about the strategy was the “push” aspect whereby the messages were automatically and regularly delivered to students. Twitter may offer the same advantage, and students can even receive the tweets via cell, if they choose to connect their phone number to their Twitter account.

In addition to Twitter, there are numerous other social networking and/or microblogging services available, including some that are specifically designed for education. For example, Edmodo (<http://www.edmodo.com>) allows instructors to create a private social networking space online which is limited in access to only their students, eliminating some of the above concerns about privacy. Although this would offer some obvious advantages, we felt that these did not outweigh the disadvantage of isolating learners from the potential interaction and the exposure to authentic Japanese text as tweeted by native speakers. Edmodo would also function only within the context of the course—once the semester ended, learners would have no reason to continue visiting and participating in the space, whereas we expect Twitter to continue to be popular, the world over, for the foreseeable future. On the other hand, another option would be a social networking space that learners might already participate in personally, such as Facebook (<http://www.facebook.com>) or a space that is popular among young people in Japan, such as Mixi (<http://mixi.jp>). However, we liked the simplicity of Twitter—its social-networking functions are limited (there are no photos/videos, walls, chats, etc.), keeping the focus squarely on the tweets, in other words, on the target language text.

From a pedagogical standpoint, one potential concern that we discussed was the possibility that student-initiated tweets might include language errors, and that these errors might be picked up by other learners. A review of the literature indicated that in peer-to-peer interaction, learners do not usually acquire errors of non-native speaking peers (e.g., Bruton and Samuda, 1980; Gascoigne, 2004; Gass and Varonis, 1989; Jacobs,

1989) although Gass and Selinker (2008) emphasize that the mediation of the instructor is still often needed to clarify which are the correct language forms. However, most of this research focuses on face-to-face, oral interaction among peers. Would the results be the same in the written, online, asynchronous environment of Twitter? To date, we do not have enough data from learner tweets to begin to explore this question, as most of our students who chose to participate did so passively through reading the tweets of the faculty.

## Kanji Learning and Twitter

The main textbook of our 2<sup>nd</sup> year Japanese courses is *Nakama 2* (Hatasa, Hatasa, & Makino, 2000). Each chapter of this textbook introduces approximately 30 kanji with a few example sentences. It does not seem that all of the kanji of the chapter are necessarily related to the contents of the chapter. It follows that the learners may not have a chance to see some of the new kanji in either the dialog or the reading. The instructor prepares a kanji handout that introduces several of the chapter's kanji each day and provides additional compounds and example sentences. However, the learners can definitely use more opportunities to see the kanji that they are learning.

It is most desirable if the learners can encounter the target kanji within a natural context. For example, Kawaguchi (1989) introduces his attempt to assign the learners to bring printed materials such as newspaper articles, manga, or advertisements with the kanji that they are learning. One of the problems for the non-advanced Japanese learners who live outside of Japan is the lack of opportunities to see Japanese writing outside of the classroom. Thanks to the Internet, more and more materials with the Japanese language are available even for those of us who live outside of Japan; however, most of them are much too difficult not only for beginning-level but even for intermediate-level learners.

What we attempt to do with Twitter is to provide the learners with sentences with the target kanji in a natural context that they can relate to. For example, our class had a *nicchoku* (日直) who does a short presentation on the assigned topic of the day at the beginning of class. As shown in an example from our Twitter account (below), the instructor or the teaching assistant tweet later in the day on something related to the *nicchoku's* presentation. On March 1, the *nicchoku* was “Shin-chan,” and she talked about how Japanese people celebrate New Year’s Day. The instructor first praised her drawings of Japanese New Year decorations. After that she added some cultural notes to Shin-chan’s presentation, using the target kanji, which are in the current or previous chapter that the class is studying. In the example below, the targeted kanji are shaded.

#MHCJ 今日の日直はシンちゃん、お正月のお祝いについてでした。門松とかの絵が立派い！ 上手ですね。お正月の食べ物と言えば、「おぞうに」です。これは、場所いによって味いが全然違うようです。例えば、関東はしょうゆ系ですが、関西は白みそ味。四国のはあまいそうです。おもちも関東は四角いで、関西は丸です。4:56 PM Mar 1st web から

On April 6, the *nicchoku* “Shan-chan” talked about the results of a survey that she conducted with some Japanese college soccer players who visited our campus in late

March. The instructor reported on Shan-chan's remarks and at the end, she introduced an idiomatic expression using the target kanji.

#MHCJ 今日の日直はシャンちゃんでした。アンケート調査の結果では、サッカー選手は受験勉強をあまりしなかったらしいです。将来やりたいことも決まっています、シャンちゃんはびっくりしたそうです。サッカー選手のみなさんが帰って、教室は火が消えたよう・・・7:33 PM Apr 6th web から

Sometimes we tweet on the current news, as shown in the example below.

#MHCJ 今日は、アイスランドの火山爆発による煙で、ヨーロッパの空路にキャンセルが相次いだらしいですね。乗客たちは迷惑だと思っているでしょうが、飛行機が落ちるよりは、空港で泣いていたほうがまだと思ってほしい。最近、地球もいろいろありますね。次はどこで何が、と、心配です。7:09 PM Apr 15th web から

Moreover, we can introduce interesting articles on the web that include the topic and/or the target kanji.

#MHCJ 就職はする人もされる会社も大変。会社が面接試験に落ちた学生さんたちに自社製品を送ってくれるそうです。将来のお客だから。それを考えると、どんな会社に申込書を送りたい？  
<http://www.asahi.com/job/news/TKY201004210270.html> 3:25 PM Apr 22nd web から

Sometimes making a good message using the target kanji is not easy; however, even the following can be helpful for the learners.

#MHCJ 今日もいいお天気！でもボキャ・クイズは「汚い部屋」とか「4月に雪が降る」とか変な文ばかり・・・9課はネガティブな言葉がたくさんありますね、文句、注意、心配、迷惑・・・みなさん、寝る前に勉強すると悪い夢を見るかもしれませんね。2:46 PM Apr 20th web から

Although replying to the instructors' tweets is optional, sometimes we got a nice reply that was worth re-tweeting. The second message below, with "@MHCJ," is a reply from a learner to the first message from an instructor.

#MHCJ 今日の午後、フィラデルフィアの近くに住んでいる友人から電話があったんだけど、電話中に急に「あ、雪が降って来た！」と。こちらは雨で良かったね。ところで、二年生はそろそろ専攻を決めなくちゃならないけど、専攻を決める前に誰かに相談した？就職とか将来のことを考えて決めたの？4:03 PM Mar 30th web から

@MHCJ 先週の火曜日は二年生の専門を決める締め切りでした。誰にも相談しなかったけど、専門はもう決めたんですわ。国際関係ですよ。国際関係と言う専門にはなんか色々な科目が含まれていて、母は「こんな専門を決めたのは就職の将来が全く見えないわ」と私にぶうぶう言っている。困りますね。 6:10 AM Mar 31st web から MHCJ 宛

In addition to the messages that aimed for learning kanji from the textbook, we have tweeted regarding big news, in particular about natural disasters. For example, during the spring semester of 2010, there were three big earthquakes in Haiti, Chile, and China. Since earthquakes are something that people who live in Japan must worry about constantly, we hope that learners of Japanese can recognize the kanji such as 地震 “earthquakes” and 津波 “tsunami”. The following messages are exchanges between an instructor and a learner from China regarding a big earthquake that occurred in China in April 2010.

#MHCJ 中国青海省玉樹チベット族自治州玉樹県で、M7.1の地震があったようです。 8:52 AM Apr 14th web から

@MHCJ また地震か。。。 2:08 PM Apr 14th web から MHCJ 宛

#MHCJ そうなんです。前に貴方が「地球が怒っているみたい」と言っていたように。どのぐらいの被害なんですか？ 中国のニュースではどんな報道をしているか教えてください。 7:54 PM Apr 14th web から xx 宛

@MHCJ 玉樹の地震には、もう1144人は死んだそうです。玉樹の海拔は4000メートルだから、そして玉樹はとっても小さい、道路がよくないから、いま救援は難しいです。アイスランドも火山爆発したですね。。。私も、心配です。 1:27 PM Apr 16th web から MHCJ 宛

### **Discussion: After One Semester**

We started tweeting at the beginning of February 2010. Since it has only been three months, it is not easy to draw any conclusion. However, let us remark on some points that we think are valuable.

There were 12 learners who participated in this project: nine of them were taking 2<sup>nd</sup> year Japanese with us, while the other three were taking 3<sup>rd</sup> year Japanese. Among the 12 learners, 10 participated in a formative feedback survey (8 in 2<sup>nd</sup> year Japanese course and 2 in 3<sup>rd</sup> year Japanese course). When we started this project, none of the learners had used Twitter actively before although some of them did already have a Twitter account. In the 2<sup>nd</sup> year Japanese class, we showed our Twitter site and read it together in class during the first week of this project. However, after that, we encouraged them to read the messages on the site but it was totally optional for the learners whether they use this site, in particular it was totally up to them to decide whether they tweet or not.

Two weeks after the initiation, seven of the 10 survey participants said they read our tweets every day to occasionally, while three said they rarely read them. At the end of the semester, we found that among the nine participants in 2<sup>nd</sup> year Japanese, three continued to tweet very often throughout the course, three did a few to several times, and three did not tweet at all. Among the three participants in 3<sup>rd</sup> year Japanese, one of them tweeted quite often for the first two weeks. In our survey, she said that she read our tweet every day and commented “I like trying to get across what’s going on in my daily life in a short manner instead of through an essay.” However, she stopped tweeting completely after the third week. The other two in the 3<sup>rd</sup> year class were invisible for this project (the one of the two did not even “follow” the faculty).

The three learners who tweeted regularly were all students from China. It suggests that with their superior kanji reading skills (as compared to non-Chinese learners), our tweets were easy for them to understand, and therefore, it was easy for them to reply. They not only replied to our tweets but also initiated new ones. They were the top-performing learners in the class; therefore, Twitter activities were a good challenge for them. On the other hand, it was not the case that the learners in 3<sup>rd</sup> year class (who should also have superior kanji reading skills) tweeted more often than the learners in 2<sup>nd</sup> year class.

Although it is difficult to generalize due to the small number of participating learners, especially from the 3<sup>rd</sup> year Japanese class, we may be able to say that the participants in 2<sup>nd</sup> year class were more interested in this project than the participants in 3<sup>rd</sup> year class, for our daily tweets were aimed at the participants in 2<sup>nd</sup> year class and often talked about what happened in their classroom. Personalizing messages seems to be an important key to motivate learners to keep up with this kind of activity. Indeed, one participant noted that “I read [the tweets] more for funny observations made about people in class [than for learning kanji].”

Interestingly, students' perception of how reading tweets might benefit their process of learning kanji did not necessarily match ours. For example, some of the open-ended responses indicated that students' conception of what it means to “learn” a kanji centers on repeatedly drawing the character until memorized. Therefore, they felt that reading the faculty's tweets did not really help them to learn kanji as it didn't involve drawing the characters, but only recognizing them (a stage in the learning process that we do feel is important). Nonetheless, all but one participant in the formative survey (conducted 2 weeks into the project) said that when they encountered unknown kanji in tweets, they tried to guess from the context, and if they still did not understand then used some type of dictionary, often online dictionaries and/or the Rikai-chan tool.

### **Conclusion: Future Plans and Ultimate Goals**

In the coming year, we plan to continue the Twitter project. Current 2<sup>nd</sup> year students will be encouraged to continue reading and/or tweeting as they enter 3<sup>rd</sup> year. Some of these students will be studying in Japan, and in exchange for the loan of an iPod Touch to take abroad with them, we will be asking them to tweet from overseas, hoping they will connect with the students studying Japanese on campus. The faculty will continue to tweet with a focus on the new 2<sup>nd</sup> year class, personalizing the content to engage their interests and present the textbook kanji in context. We are interested to see if



the current 2<sup>nd</sup> year students will continue to participate in the Twitter community as they become 3<sup>rd</sup> year students—will this habit continue or will their interest wane when the content is no longer tailored to match their current course? Ultimately, we hope that participation in Twitter will help students to overcome their initial hesitance, building self-confidence in their ability to communicate in Japanese. In addition, by developing Japanese connections and interests on Twitter, we hope that they will be motivated to continue developing and practicing their Japanese skills through tweeting throughout their future lives.

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