L2 Student Writers' Perceptions of Microblogging

Onuma Lakarnchua

(onuma.l@chula.ac.th)
Chulalongkorn University, Thailand

Punchalee Wasanasomsithi

(punchalee.w@chula.ac.th)
Chulalongkorn University, Thailand

Abstract

Peer feedback has been found to benefit second and foreign language (L2) student writers. Technology affords new channels through which students can exchange feedback, and one that has shown promise as a feedback channel is microblogging. The introduction of microblogging to lectures and conferences appears to promote greater interactivity, and it is posited that a similar positive outcome may occur if microblogging is introduced for student writers to exchange feedback throughout the writing process**.** Although positive perceptions of a particular technology are important for successful implementation, research on how the benefits resulting from microblogging use during lectures and conferences can be extended to the area of writing is lacking. Ascertaining students' initial perceptions of technologies, particularly what they find positive and the difficulties they encounter, will help inform later use. This study, therefore, sought to examine L2 student writers' perceptions of microblogging as they used it to work on completing writing assignments over the course of one semester. It was found that perceptions were generally negative towards microblogging, except for its use as a feedback channel. Access issues, usability issues, and a perceived lack of popularity of the chosen microblogging platform were put forward as aspects that contributed to participants' negative perceptions.

1 Introduction

1.1 *Benefits and drawbacks of peer feedback*

From a social constructivist view – where learning is seen as the construction and refinement of knowledge through social interaction and negotiation for mutual understanding – peer feedback is a highly desirable activity (Lu & Bol, 2007). In engaging in peer feedback exchanges, student writers must interact with one another, both giving and receiving advice on various aspects of their writing. This sharing of ideas is consequently believed to help student writers develop their writing skills, as they both teach to and learn from each other (Ho & Savignon, 2007). Having peers offer feedback fosters student writers' awareness of the audience for their work, encourages more favorable attitudes towards the act of writing, and leads to a greater understanding of both the writing and revision processes (Min, 2006). These positive effects also appear to hold true when students are writing in a second or foreign language (L2), even when they question their peers' capacity to provide viable feedback (Lockhart & Ng, 1993). For instance, although L2 writers in Tsui and

Ng's (2000) study showed a marked preference for instructor feedback, they still acknowledged the role peer feedback played in fostering a collaborative learning environment, helping to draw their attention to problems within their texts, making them more aware of their audience, and encouraging a sense of ownership of their written work. Furthermore, the peer who offers feedback develops his/her own cognitive skills in the process (Topping, 1998, as cited in Crossman & Kite, 2012).

Peer feedback exchanges that take place in face-to-face settings, however, may be both time-consuming and anxiety-provoking (Ho & Savignon, 2007; Liu & Sadler, 2003). A posited alternative channel for peer feedback activities is computer-mediated communication (CMC) technologies.

1.2   Benefits and drawbacks of CMC technology-supported peer feedback

CMC technologies are believed to be helpful in the exchange of peer feedback because they offer a channel for this activity that allows it to be potentially accomplished at any time or place where the technologies can be accessed. They could, furthermore, possibly reduce the anxiety engendered in face-to-face communication, where learners must confront others regarding their texts (Lu & Bol, 2007).

However, many of the technologies that have been investigated as a feedback platform have been found to be lacking because they were either predominantly asynchronous (where there can be a time delay between the delivery and the reception of a message) or synchronous (where messages are sent and received in real time) modes of communication (Wang, 2009). Liu and Sadler (2003), for instance, found that while participants who discussed previously-sent feedback via a MOO (a chat room where communication occurs in real time between users) with their peers enjoyed and were quite comfortable with the use of this synchronous technology, the inability to determine turn-taking greatly frustrated some of the learners, and led one to simply stop commenting. On the other hand, Ho and Savignon (2007), investigating Taiwanese learners' perceptions and attitudes towards the use of a word-processing program's annotation features coupled with email to exchange peer feedback, discovered that the participants liked the flexibility and relative anonymity of e-mails, but revealed that the time delay sometimes led to late feedback. Dippold (2009) looked at how blogs were used for the exchange of peer feedback in an advanced German class and concluded that because the technology was essentially asynchronous, it was difficult for the participants to quickly reply to comments their peers had left. Thus, these technologies, though beneficial in some respects, suffered from either time lags or lack of a way to properly sequence turn-taking in peer feedback exchanges. One potential alternative technological channel for exchanging peer feedback while writing is microblogging, a computer-mediated communication technology that combines both asynchronous and synchronous features (Gao, Luo, & Zhang, 2012).

1.3   Features of microblogging and its academic potential

Microblogging refers to the act of posting a short text message, often from a mobile device, to disseminate one's thoughts and opinions, or to inform others about one's present circumstances. The posted messages are displayed in reverse chronological order so readers can easily see which posts were made earlier (Java, Song, Finin & Tseng, 2007; Sinnapan & Zutshi, 2011b). Microblogging melds features of both blogging and social networking, but is a distinct technology. Unlike blogs or a social networking site like Facebook, microblogging is often used for spontaneous communication, rather than for storing information and engaging in more extensive discourse (Ebner & Schiefner, 2008; Sinnapan & Zutshi, 2011b). Due to word limits enforced by microblogging platforms, microblog posts are short. For instance, Twitter, the most popular and the most studied microblogging site, allows only 140 characters per message, giving it a sleek, information-driven design (DeMers, 2013; Sinnapan & Zutshi, 2011b). Typically, Twitter is utilized to update others on one's daily activities, initiate or continue conversations, and share information such as

news or websites of interest at a rate faster than most other technologies. Microblogging is also characterized by more frequent updating rates (Java et al., 2007), due to the technology's great mobility (Ebner, Lienhardt, Rohs, & Meyer, 2010), as microblogging can be accomplished rapidly and easily via numerous channels, including email, web-based interfaces, and mobile phones (Gao et al., 2012; Sinnapan & Zutshi, 2011a). According to Java, Song, Finin, and Tseng (2007), the enforced brevity of microblog messages and the ease of posting them "lowers users' requirement of time and thought investment for content generation" (p. 57). As the greatest appeal of microblogging sites such as Twitter is the immediacy with which information can be disseminated (Costa, Beham, Reinhardt, & Sillaots, 2008), educational researchers have postulated that microblogging can facilitate fast, timely communication in academic settings.

Other proposed academic benefits of microblogging via platforms such as Twitter (where microblog posts are referred to as "tweets"), include the ability to foster collaboration among learners and increase learner participation (Ebner et al., 2010; Elavsky, Mislan, & Elavsky 2011). Many of these posited advantages are starting to find empirical support. For instance, Sinnappan and Zutshi (2011b) discovered increased participation in a study where Twitter was used with second-year undergraduate students of an Australian university who had the opportunity to interact with American students undergoing a similar course of study. The researchers noted that while participation could not be assessed within the context of their research, "the number of tweets and the richness of each tweet suggest that students were keen to participate and contribute" and also, "the discussion continued for a longer period than the duration of the assigned learning activities" (Sinnappan & Zutshi, 2011b, p. 1132).

1.4   Potential of microblogging as a channel for peer feedback

There is already some evidence that the use of microblogging to encourage audience participation during presentations and lectures can be effective, as it can help increase the amount of interactive questioning and resource sharing (Ebner, 2009; Elavsky et al., 2011; Gao et al., 2012). In the study by Elavsky et al. (2011), microblogging in a large lecture course enabled multidirectional communication, and throughout the semester, "robust conversation ensued" (p. 228). The learners in Vorvoreanu, Bowen, and Laux's (2012) study reported greater comfort with classroom participation and the sharing of opinions using microblogging. Recounting her positive experiences in a Twitter-based community formed by a conference's participants, Rodems (2011) described many beneficial aspects of microblogging:

> I could follow along, watch as the moderator posted questions related to higher education, and then read a whole host of responses. Side conversations began. Resources were shared. Many had follow-up conversations and developed friendships over these chats. I discovered a community for doctoral students. When I was struggling with meeting a deadline, when I was unsure about how to proceed with a part of my dissertation, when I needed support or a good kick-in-the-pants, the community was there. (p. 3)

As can be seen, many of the aspects discussed would seem to suggest an environment conducive to learning as viewed from a social constructivist perspective. Ware and Warschauer (2006) contend that technologies that foster interaction among student writers are more likely to lead to the production of constructive feedback. Microblogging is one such technology that allows a time- and place-independent means for social interaction and the continual exchange of ideas, which are key to academic development from the social constructivist viewpoint (Lu & Bol, 2007), to occur.

It may be argued that the relationship between presenters and their audience shares certain parallels with the relationship between a student writer and his/her readers. Just as the dynamics of most large-lecture venues are typically unidirectional from the speaker, who has no way to access the thoughts of the audience (Elavsky et al, 2011), the act of writing is often undertaken alone, without timely external input (Hirvela, 1999). Without the benefit of reader comments, writers may be egocentric in their writing, unable to see their work from the viewpoint of another (Tsui &

Ng, 2000). This parallel and its implications are worth exploring, particularly in how micro-blogging can be used to address the problems that arise from the inherent nature of the peer feed-back activity; namely, the rather large amount of time required and the feelings of concern over having to challenge others' texts.

The main question posed here, therefore, is, can microblogging be used as an effective peer feedback channel in a manner similar to how it facilitates interactivity in lectures and conferences, by giving student writers a means by which to stay connected to their peers throughout the writing process? Such continual connectivity is difficult to achieve without the use of a CMC technology such as microblogging. Although research on how the benefits that arise from microblogging use during lectures and conferences can be extended to the area of writing, it is however only in the beginning stages. Culpan (2005, as cited in Elwood & MacLean, 2009) observed that to success-fully introduce a technology to the teaching and learning process, fostering positive attitudes on the part of the users of the technology is essential. As Tang and Austin (2009) cautioned, "rather than blindly touting the latest computer technology, managerial fad, or fashion, [educators] need to focus on students' perceptions regarding the use of technologies" (p. 1242). Learners' initial per-ceptions of a technology will highlight the benefits they felt they derived from it and the difficul-ties they encountered; the former can be maximized, and the latter either eliminated or alleviated. This study, therefore, sought to examine L2 student writers' perceptions of the use of micro-blogging as they used it while working on writing assignments over the course of one semester.

2   Study

2.1   Participants and research context

The participants of this research were L2 student writers, which in this study refers to any se-cond or foreign language learners engaging in the act of writing. In this particular research, the L2 student writers under investigation were Thai learners of English as a foreign language (EFL), all in their first year at the Faculty of Engineering at a public university in Bangkok, Thailand. From here onwards, they will be referred to as L2 student writers.

In total, there were 35 participants, 26 males and 9 females, with a mean age of 18.5 years. The number of participants investigated in this study was relatively small, but as this study constituted preliminary research into the use of Twitter to aid the writing process in a Thai academic context (of which there is still a relatively small body of literature), it was felt that the insights gathered from them could still likely help increase understanding of how microblogging can be more effec-tively implemented in this setting.

All the participants were taking a mandatory first-year course taught by the first author, hereaf-ter referred to as the researcher-instructor, in the academic year 2012. This was the first of two English courses offered to the university's first-year students. Course attendance was mandatory for all first-year students, except those in the Faculty of Arts. The class met face-to-face for three hours per week for 16 weeks, with two weeks allocated to the midterm and final examinations. The course focused on all four language skills and utilized a commercial textbook. By its comple-tion, students were expected to be able to utilize information from various English sources to in-form both their oral and their written assignments. Their final grades were based on examination scores, project scores, and classwork and homework scores.

The class was taught in a classroom equipped with computers with Internet access, with a ratio of one computer to approximately three students. In addition, all of the students had mobile phones with wireless Internet capability (provided by the university), and several students had laptop and tablet computers that also allowed them to go online. They could also access the Internet at com-puter workstations provided throughout the university. Therefore, all participants had a viable method of accessing the microblogging platform that was introduced. In the classroom, the re-searcher-instructor also had a computer connected to a projector that allowed her to share infor-mation on her screen with the entire class.

2.2 Research instruments

The data on participants' perceptions of microblogging were collected via a questionnaire authored by the researcher-instructor, based on the literature on microblogging in general use and in education, and semi-structured retrospective interviews, following a protocol also authored by the researcher-instructor. The interviews were conducted with three randomly selected participants following the mandatory microblogging period. Both the questionnaire and the interview protocol were submitted to three experts in the field of EFL education and research for evaluation. Suggestions from the experts were used to modify the instruments before they were pilot tested with a group of student writers with similar characteristics (e.g. similar age, same field of study). More modifications were undertaken following the pilot testing to yield the final data collection instruments used in the present research.

The questionnaire elicited demographic information, such as gender and age, and a brief overview of participants' past experiences with Twitter. Participants' perceptions regarding the usefulness of Twitter for various purposes were elicited via 20 statements that presented different functions for which Twitter has been used, such as "Using Twitter for contacting friends and acquaintances". The participants rated each statement on a 5-point Likert scale, where 5 corresponded to "very useful" and 1 corresponded to "not at all useful." The respondents were also asked to select whether or not they would recommend the use of microblogging to next year's students, and to provide a rationale for their choice. The responses of the three randomly chosen interview participants were used to help give further insight into the perceptions of microblogging, expanding on the points the questionnaire targeted.

2.3 Research procedures

A week prior to the data implementation of microblogging use as a feedback channel during the writing process, the researcher-instructor introduced the microblogging platform to the participants during a face-to-face class session. The platform chosen was Twitter (http://www.twitter.com), since it is the most well-known and often-used site for microblogging, to the extent that using Twitter and microblogging are considered synonymous (Sippanan & Zutshi, 2011b). Before the participants registered for their own Twitter accounts, online safety, etiquette, and privacy were discussed. The students then chose screen names (online pseudonyms), established their accounts, and learned how to be notified whenever the researcher-instructor or their classmates posted to the site. The researcher-instructor briefly demonstrated how to post to Twitter, how to shorten links to be posted, and how to use the @-symbol to direct posts to a particular user. Then the participants were given a week to familiarize themselves with the platform before they started posting to the site. Meanwhile, ideas for potential uses of Twitter, with an emphasis on learning English, were discussed in class, and its use was highly encouraged. This week gave the learners time to practice using the technology without being evaluated and to address any difficulties they encountered. The researcher-instructor also introduced the concepts of writing as a process and peer feedback during this time.

After the week of voluntary Twitter use, mandatory microblog use was initiated and lasted ten weeks. A minimum baseline for Twitter use was given in the guidelines for each of seven writing assignments (two narrative texts, two emails recommending travel destinations, two argumentative texts, and an essay on their personal role model). Each assignment lasted a minimum of one week. For each writing assignment, the student writers were asked to post questions, concerns, or comments as they worked on each step of the writing process. They were also asked to respond to their peers' microblog posts. On average, they were required to make at least five microblog posts per week..Their posts were given scores that contributed to the classwork and homework portion of their final course grade. Making the microblog posts graded was to ensure a minimum number of posts, but, although each writing assignment had a mandatory microblogging component, the student writers were also explicitly encouraged to use Twitter as much as possible, for both personal and class-related purposes.

2.4   Data analysis

Data were gathered after the end of ten weeks of mandatory microblogging via two research instruments: the questionnaire and the interviews. The questionnaire items for which responses were recorded on a 5-point Likert scale were analyzed with descriptive statistics; specifically, calculating the mean rating for each item. The open-ended item (which asked for respondents to justify their choice of whether they would recommend continued microblogging or not) and the interview responses were subjected to directed content analysis, a data analysis method where existing theoretical frameworks or concepts are utilized to identify initial themes or patterns in the data (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The researchers examined the questionnaire and interview data for information regarding the student writers' perceptions of microblogging as a channel for peer feedback. The data were examined in conjunction with the usefulness ratings, in order to identify any connections.

All of the data collected were in Thai. Excerpts from the questionnaire and the interviews presented in the following sections were translated by the researcher-instructor.

3   Results

The results were derived from analysis of the Twitter use questionnaire and the interviews that were conducted. A total of 33 participants completed the questionnaire on Twitter use. Of these, only five (15.2%) had used Twitter prior to joining the course, with none having previously used it for academic purposes.

As noted, the respondents were presented with 20 statements regarding the use of Twitter for different objectives, such as using it to receive feedback from the instructor while completing writing assignments, and were asked to rate the perceived usefulness of the technology for the named function. The mean usefulness rating was calculated for each statement, and the results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Mean usefulness rating of Twitter functions

Statement	Mean Usefulness Rating
1. Using Twitter to post while working on an English writing assignment for **the teacher** to comment on.	3.93
2. Using Twitter to post while working on an English writing assignment for **classmates** to comment on.	3.15
3. Using Twitter to post while working on an English writing assignment for **other Internet users** to comment on.	2.55
4. Using Twitter to express my opinion on my classmates' English writing assignments.	2.91
5. Using Twitter to contact **the teacher** when I have questions while doing my English writing assignment.	3.45
6. Using Twitter to contact **my classmates** when I have questions while doing my English writing assignment.	2.76
7. Using Twitter to contact **other Internet users** when I have questions while doing my English writing assignment.	2.39
8. Using Twitter to answer my classmates' questions while they work on their English writing assignments.	2.91
9. Using Twitter for learning English in other ways, such as reviewing before a test.	2.58
10. Using Twitter to learn other subjects aside from English.	1.94
11. Using Twitter for contacting friends and acquaintances.	2.42
12. Using Twitter to follow news from friends and acquaintances.	2.58
13. Using Twitter to contact other people, such as actors and singers.	2.24
14. Using Twitter to follow news from other people, such as actors and singers.	2.30
15. Using Twitter to follow news in general, such as political news or entertainment news.	2.64
16. Using Twitter to follow news on special events, such as flooding.	2.88
17. Using Twitter to record daily events that happen to you.	2.36
18. Using Twitter to share personal information	2.85
19. Using Twitter to share interesting information, such as interesting websites	2.59
20. Using Twitter to search for general information.	2.16

Note: All figures rounded to 2 sig. fig.

Overall, it may be noted the respondents did not perceive Twitter (and by extension, microblogging) to be particularly useful for any of the purposes listed. Of the twenty functions, only two received a mean usefulness rating that was greater than 3, with the majority of ratings falling in the range of "not very useful" to "not at all useful." Although the participants' relative unfamiliarity with microblogging as an educational activity might have prevented their perceptions of its usefulness for learning, it is surprising that perceptions were also negative toward its use for non-academic and social purposes. A comment by one participant that she used Facebook for her social communications and to keep herself updated with news suggested a preference for CMC technologies other than microblogging. This view was confirmed by another one of the interviewed participants, who expressed his problems with Twitter:

> To be frank, I didn't really like it. I don't really use Twitter. I actually signed up for it the first time when [the instructor] asked us to do so in class … I don't really know how to use it … It might be convenient for those who have used it before. I never had. (S2]

This response seems to reflect the participants' relative lack of familiarity with the technology. As noted, only a few had ever engaged in microblogging prior to joining the course, and despite the provision of a week for practice, many expressed difficulties with using the technology. An interviewed participant [S3] confessed, "*I logged on and didn't know what to do first!*" This finding is similar to that reported in other studies, such as Costa et al. (2008). Some of the participants of their study also expressed displeasure with Twitter, calling it distracting and overwhelming.

When asked if they would recommend the use of Twitter to next year's students, five participants declined to answer; of those who responded, more than half (69.7%) said they would not recommend its use for future students of the course. Their reasons for this decision fell into three main categories: access difficulties, usability issues, and the perceived lack of the technology's popularity in Thailand.

Four respondents (12.1%) cited access issues as the main reason for why they would not recommend continued use of microblogging. This finding was unexpected given the variety of ways in which students could go online: via their personal mobile and computing devices, computers on campus, and computers in the classroom where they had class. These respondents, however, were referring not to their own situations but hypothetical cases in which students had faulty or no access to the Internet, such as those in dormitories, although other preferred platforms would presumably have the same problem. One respondent cited several reasons—chief among them problems with access—for why he or she did not agree with continued use of microblogging, and added, "There is absolutely no reason to use Twitter."

Difficulties with using the technology were also brought up by seven respondents (21.2%) as a reason to discontinue Twitter use, but, beyond simply stating that the technology was complicated, only two cited specific usability issues. One of the issues was that, in order to be aware of Twitter activity (i.e. to be informed of new messages), one had to actively log onto the site. Another was the inconvenience of having to use a file-sharing site along with Twitter, as posts longer than 140 characters were not possible. This character limitation was also identified as a problem with the technology.

Six questionnaire respondents (18.2%) specifically suggested switching over to the use of the social network site Facebook, a recommendation also mentioned by one of the interviewed participants:

> Well, I think Twitter is inappropriate. I mean, it's not very appropriate. I think Facebook is more accessible. If you created a small group on Facebook for students to leave comments or share their files, it would be more convenient. (S1)

This interviewed participant went on to make a further argument for using Facebook because, "anyhow, students already have Facebook accounts, so it would better to use Facebook." Facebook was seen to be capable of handling the same functions as Twitter (such as being able to send and receive messages), but to him, its advantage was that it was already popular with this group of participants. The only interviewed participant who advocated continued use of Twitter gave this interesting reason:

> To be frank, some people don't really want to use Facebook to do work. They want to use it to talk to their friends. (S3)

Though the majority of the participants had negative perceptions of microblogging, 10 respondents to the questionnaire (30.3%) agreed with using the technology with next year's students. They stated that the technology made sharing their work and receiving feedback on it, from both peers and the instructor, fast and convenient. This was in line with the results regarding the usefulness ratings: the three functions of Twitter which received the highest mean usefulness ratings were using it to interact with peers and the teacher about writing. One interview participant also noted that microblog posts were helpful because they allowed her to see how far along other student writers were in their writing process. It also served to remind her of assignments she had forgotten to complete.

4   Discussion

This study sought to determine L2 student writers' perceptions of microblogging as they utilized the technology during the completion of their writing assignments. This research was predi-

cated on the proposition that the positive effects seen when microblogging is applied to lectures and conferences could also occur when student writers use microblogging as a readily available feedback channel as they work on completing L2 writing assignments. However, in order to assess such benefits, it is important to first determine L2 student writers' perceptions of this technology, as taking into account the perceived advantages and drawbacks of the technology will help inform its future implementation.

4.1 Comparison of findings to past studies

In summary, it would appear the L2 student writers of this study did not have positive perceptions of microblogging. The participants' generally negative perception of microblogging differs from findings reported by other research on the use of this technology in language learning, such as Borau, Ullrich, Feng and Shen (2009), who reported almost half of their participants felt the use of Twitter led to greater ease in communicating in English, and more than half to less shyness. Their research, however, looked at how microblogging can be used to provide authentic contexts to practice the target language, an overall different objective than that of the present study. However, negative perceptions of microblogging were found by Vorvoreanu et al. (2012) when they looked at its use to support a large lecture classroom. They noted that following the introduction of microblogging via the Yammer platform, despite more positive perceptions of how microblogging facilitated classroom participation, the participants' mean perceptions of learning and course enjoyment showed significant declines. Similar to the present study, approximately 20.9% of the respondents to their post-intervention questionnaire disliked microblogging, revealing that they found it disorienting, superfluous, and lacking in human interaction, which was felt to be highly necessary for learning. However, the research objectives of Vorvoreanu et al. (2012) differed from that of the present study, although this investigation postulates a parallelism between the shortcomings of a large lecture setting and the writing process, which can be overcome through the use of microblogging. As noted, research into how microblogging can be used to support the writing process of L2 student writers is still in its early stages. The dissatisfaction regarding microblog use expressed by the present study's participants offers greater insight into how it may be employed more successfully and brings to the fore several key issues to take into consideration when introducing microblogging into the L2 writing process, as they cited access issues, usability issues, and the technology's relative lack of popularity in Thailand as reasons why they would not recommend its continued use. It might be said that because perceptions play an important role in the effectiveness of a technology's implementation, if these issues can be adequately addressed, student writers' perceptions may improve. Subsequently, the implementation of microblogging to L2 writing instruction might also be positively affected.

4.2 Difficulties with Internet accessibility

Hypothetical problematic access was raised by several participants as a point of contention. Although it was not revealed by the respondents if they personally experienced problems accessing the Internet, the very fact that they raised the issue makes it one for consideration. It was believed that issues of access would be at a minimum due to the many channels through which the participants could go online, but this belief was not shared by the participants. It may be pertinent when implementing any technology for the instructor to explicitly review the various available venues, e.g. laptops, computers on campus, mobile devices, through which it can be accessed, as this is likely not a problem that would be particular to microblogging, but to any technology that requires one to use the Internet. Furthermore, it may be necessary, in the case of Twitter, to explicitly delineate the various applications available that allow posting to this microblogging platform. Elavsky et al. (2011) discovered in their research that although most of their participants' tweets were made via the web, over 20 other applications were also used for posting to Twitter. Such applications may be introduced to student writers in order to present them with more options for posting to Twitter, and reduced the perceived difficulties with accessibility.

4.3   Difficulties with technical aspects

Difficulty in using the platform was also mentioned. As was revealed by one of the participants, the beginning stages of microblogging use can be quite baffling for new users. The one week that was given to the students to explore Twitter on a voluntary basis and to raise any problems they encountered proved to be insufficient. Students who have never used microblogging before may need more time to learn to navigate the technology. In an analysis of 21 microblogging studies, Gao et al. (2012) discovered that familiarizing learners with Twitter was a key challenge, as many found it daunting and difficult to navigate as new users. It is interesting to note, however, that none of the participants contacted the researcher-instructor, either face-to-face or online, with these issues during the ten-week period of graded Twitter use, although they contacted her about writing-related issues. It may be necessary to explicitly inform students that the instructor is available to help them not only with academic matters, but with technological issues as well. Peers can also be pointed out as sources of technological aid. Knowing there is help available to handle technical issues may improve the perception of microblogging as a perplexing platform.

4.4   Difficulties with impressions of Twitter

Finally, the fact that Twitter was relatively unknown in Thailand was set forth as one of the major reasons why microblogging should be discontinued. None of the participants explicitly stated why this was problematic, only that the small Twitter user base was a reason why microblogging should be abandoned. The student writers perceived the technology to be rather unpopular, when actually, in 2010, Thailand ranked twenty-fifth worldwide for the number of Twitter users (Lim, 2010). However, Twitter has been cast in a slightly negative light in the country, with Thailand's government the first governing body to lend support to country-specific censorship of messages posted to the platform (Hodal, 2012). Aside from this, the fact that they perceived Twitter to have a small user base in Thailand seemed to be a particular point of contention. These impressions of Twitter likely need to be addressed explicitly with L2 student writers before the technology is implemented, in order to improve their perceptions of it.

A fact that may be capitalized on is how it appeared that the participants wished to have contact with individuals other than their classmates and teacher, an endeavor that would be stymied by a perceived lack of potential people with whom to communicate. If this is the case, this may be seen as a positive sign that L2 student writers are open to having their work evaluated by outside readers. Student writers can be directed to interact with other users on the platform beyond their classmates and teachers, in order to give them a better sense of the size of the user base on Twitter, although online safety, privacy, and etiquette should be reiterated.

However, it is relevant to consider how one interviewed participant argued in favor of Twitter precisely *because* of its perceived relative obscurity in the study's context. The implication was that because the social network site Facebook was already well-used for more social purposes, it should not be appropriated for academic work. This is an important issue to take into consideration, as per Dunlap and Lowenthal's (2009) admonition that teachers and students may not always want to be included in each other's social spheres. If student writers feel teachers are invading their personal online space, it may subsequently affect their use of the implemented technology. As such, Twitter, given adequate training and discussion to address potential difficulties, would seem a more fitting technology to fulfill the role of a peer feedback channel.

4.5   Twitter vs. Facebook

It is also crucial to take into consideration that, although more than half of the participants were against the idea of using microblogging with a future group of student writers, 18.2% suggested that Facebook be used instead. That almost a fifth of the participants thought to recommend the use of another technology suggests that they did not reject the integration of technology into their learning process per se but merely objected to the particular technology under investigation. A

number of the participants felt that several of the features of Twitter overlapped with those of the social network site Facebook. A few also argued that Facebook had a number of useful features that Twitter lacked, namely, the ability to share files without using another site, the ability to post messages longer than 140 characters, and the platform's more frequent message notification rate. Each of these aforementioned features will be discussed in the following section.

4.6 Comparison of Twitter and Facebook features

One of the issues the participants had with Twitter was the need to utilize another site to share files of their writing assignments. This is connected to another problem they brought up, which is the platform's limitation of 140 characters. Complete files must be uploaded to another site and shared via a link on Twitter. While this uploading may cause a slight inconvenience, it does keep to a minimum the information the student must navigate through when they are using Twitter. As some of Costa et al. (2008) participants revealed, information overload can become an issue when using the heavily-trafficked site. DeMers (2013) even argued that Twitter's streamlined interface is one of its major advantages over a more information-laden site such as Facebook. Therefore, even though there are applications that allow users to circumvent Twitter's 140-character limitation (e.g. TwitLonger, Twenth, TwitPlus), the character restriction may be seen as a benefit of the platform. Microblogging forces users to be more succinct and clear with their writing, which "is a professionally useful skill for students to develop" (Dunlap & Lowenthal 2009, p. 132).

Finally, some of the participants did not like having to log onto the site frequently to see when new messages were posted. This may have been a result of the posting schedule employed by this study, which was constructed without input from the participants. The student writers of this study had to post on average five times per week, which meant that each participant had to read at least 175 posts each week, or approximately 25 posts per day. It was believed that this amount would be manageable, but some participants may have felt overwhelmed by the number of posts and felt they had to constantly log in to read them to remain sufficiently updated. For users unfamiliar with Twitter, having to navigate a large, ever-growing stream of information can be highly problematic, as noted by Ebner et al. (2010). This is an issue that requires consideration when implementing this technology. This problem may be addressed by involving students in the construction of a posting schedule that will be more satisfactory for all parties involved.

Additionally, despite some of the participants' perception that there were many overlapping features between Twitter and Facebook, there are certain key differences which need to be considered when selecting either of these technologies – or indeed, any CMC technology – for use. Chief among these is the fact that Twitter allows an element of anonymity that is more difficult to achieve on Facebook, which urges users to share their real information to connect with people from their offline lives (DeMers, 2013). Such anonymity may be beneficial to the peer feedback process. For one, it helps reduce the pressure of this activity, which is cited as one of the disadvantages of face-to-face peer feedback exchange (Ho & Savignon, 2007). In addition, as Lu and Bol (2007) discovered, when learners are able to keep their identities private when giving feedback, the feedback tends to be more critical, and therefore, more useful to the recipient. At the same time, however, Twitter allows easy connection to a community of users beyond the walls of the classroom and beyond the parameters of the student writers' offline lives, a community that includes activists, corporations, and governments (DeMers, 2013). Therefore, it affords interaction and communication in ways that differentiate it from other CMC technologies.

5 Conclusion and implications

Although the findings of the present study are believed to provide insight into the use of microblogging as a peer feedback platform, it should be noted it may be difficult to generalize its results to other contexts, as this research took place in a Thai university with a rather small, homogenous sample. There may be certain issues related to the reputation of Twitter in Thailand specifically that may not factor into its use in other countries. In this study, furthermore, the data

were collected using only self-report measures, which put certain constraints on the ability to generalize findings to other contexts, but which were judged to be sufficient data collection measures for the present study, as its major aim was to gain initial insight into a group of L2 student writers' reactions and experiences with microblogging.

This study sought to determine L2 student writers' perceptions of microblogging when it is used as a channel for the exchange of peer feedback. It was found that L2 student writers' perceptions of microblogging tended towards the negative, with them citing difficulties with accessibility and technical aspects, and a rather unfavorable view of Twitter, the chosen microblogging platform, as a reason for why use of the technology should be abandoned or replaced by the use of Facebook, which they felt was an easier, more familiar technology. Only the use of microblogging as a channel for peer feedback exchange garnered perceptions that tended towards the positive. The immediacy of communication and mobility offered by microblogging, as well as its being a site that is not already well-known and oft-used by L2 student writers, would seem to recommend its use as a feedback channel for them to employ once the perceived problems with it are adequately addressed.

Issues that emerged in this study suggest there are several points L2 writing instructors must address if they wish to capitalize on microblogging's capacity to serve as a channel to facilitate peer feedback exchange. First, student writers should be provided with an extended period to familiarize themselves with microblogging (the week allotted in this study did not appear sufficient). Secondly, this familiarization period should be coupled with both easily available technical assistance and a discussion of issues that may affect student writers from fully exploiting the technology, such as how to reach out to other users on the platform or different ways to access the platform. Finally, the involvement of student writers in scheduling and other decisions regarding the use of the technology where possible may help alleviate problems that arose from a posting schedule that appeared to be overwhelming, and possibly lessen the sense that it was a difficult platform to navigate.

It is worthwhile to note that, although the majority of perceptions of the microblogging platform, as it was implemented in this particular context, were negative – which may be specific to this research context, where Twitter was perceived to have a rather unfavorable reputation – some of the student writers were still able to see the technology's value. Many of the features they remarked on are in line with what the literature posits as educationally beneficial aspects of microblogging. These include being able to easily and quickly communicate with the instructor and peers, receiving support at every stage of the writing process, and exchanging feedback at any time and beyond the classroom. As noted, the perceptions of the usefulness of microblogging as a means to interact regarding writing were more favorable than for other functions, which would seem to support continued exploration of this CMC technology as a feedback channel.

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