

# INTEGRATING SOCIAL MEDIA APPS AND DEVELOPING CULTURAL COMPETENCE IN THE EFL CLASSROOM

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## INTRODUCTION

One of the fundamental skills that ideally a student should acquire in their journey through foreign language learning is not just the ability to develop the four basic skills of language but also the ability to understand, communicate with and effectively interact with people across cultures. In pedagogical terms, we call this cultural competence. One of the important questions that we as EFL teachers often find ourselves asking is; How can we integrate and hone English literacy and cultural competence in EFL classrooms in Japan? As such awareness of other culture seems to be lacking in most of our students. McVeigh (2001) argued that university students here have been socialized that anything non-Japanese is foreign and therefore equates to non-conformity which is going against the culture of conservatism in Japan. This very notion hinders some students to feel or become disinterested in foreign culture in their language classes.

As EFL teachers I strongly feel that it is one of our tasks to stimulate student's interest in learning foreign culture in our language classes as we have a great opportunity to integrate that component as part of our lessons.

One of the ways we can do this is by integrating social media apps in the classroom. Top (2012) argues that in recent years social technologies have been widely used by students on a daily basis. Even though it was perceived as a type of technology used mainly for social and entertainment purposes, it has gradually been adapted for use in education. Mao (2014) stated that the use of these applications helps to create social-media-focused culture that is influencing how people communicate, teach and learn.

*Therefore, in this teaching article I would like to:*

1. Discuss social media apps that can be used in the classroom.
2. Share some ideas for task- based activities through the use of these apps.

## DISCUSSION

### **What social media apps can we use in class and how?**

Hulse (2018) proposed that the use of smartphones is now part of Japanese students' everyday reality, thus there exists an opportunity to exploit these devices for educational purposes. Smeda et al (2014) also emphasized that the positive effects of different digital communication tools and have in education have been investigated in different studies and from different aspects such as their potentials for enhancing learning.

In such case, which among these social media apps can we use to include a cultural component in the language classroom?

## I. Twitter

Twitter known as a microblogging site involves writing very short updates on what you are doing, your ideas, activities, links to interesting sites and so on. Twitter limits updates to 140 characters, and these updates are known in the Twitter community as ‘tweets’ (British Council, n.d.)

I have selected Twitter as a useful tool in an EFL class, as it enables students to practice the target language in *short turns* encouraging students to express their transactional intentions and opinions on a wide variety of topics. It is not as demanding like long discussion boards that requires *long turns* and where most students focus more on the accuracy of grammar which makes them conscious in everything they write and eventually leads them to finding the task daunting. In addition, it is also a good avenue for students to learn what’s happening outside Japan through trending topics and trending news. Following popular trends and getting snippets of information are a good way to drive students to be curious about other cultures and delve deeper.

*Some activities where you can use Twitter in class:*

- 1. Twitter Journal** – the question that twitter post in its small box says: “What is happening?” By using this as a conversation driver, I asked my students to post at least two tweets a week in English. (they can opt to use a non-personal account e.g. using their KIFL address to sign up instead of their personal emails). This is a good way to practice the “present continuous form” They can write anything about what they are doing, or any current trend that they are interested in or any important event that is currently happening globally. I believe it is important to emphasize (in current events topic) that they should write, comment on something that is not just about Japan but also global events which are always available and appearing in their Twitter feed.
- 2. Follow that Trend!** – In this activity I grouped the students accordingly and asked them to search for the top 3 global trending topics on Twitter that day. I asked them to reply in English to one of the tweets or post their own opinions using the #tag of the trending topic. Students will usually carefully check and construct their sentences since they are aware that this is a public post. This is a good opportunity for teachers to encourage grammar accuracy and reinforce it through practice.
- 3. Tell me more about that # (hashtag)** - According to Taylor (2015) hashtag (#) is a label used on social media sites that makes it easier to look for information with a theme or specific content. Hashtags also encourage social media users to explore content that catches their eye.

Many students use twitter on the daily either because they want to post something or follow a tweet or just browse through their feed. Through individual or group activities you can ask the students what #'s do they often use or follow, through that you can further encourage them to tell you more about what are popular trends in that #'s, for instance one student always follow #kpop or #cafe or for current events

#covid or # Tokyo2020. You can ask the students to present or share information about that hashtag through a group speaking activity.

## II. YouTube

Watkins and Wilkins (2011) state that *YouTube videos* are great avenues to stimulate cultural lessons, enhance exposure to World Englishes, and promote authentic vocabulary development. It also encourages learner autonomy as students can watch *YouTube* videos at their own phase and pause and stop whenever they need to. It also has the availability of subtitles which can assist language beginners in understanding the content. Apart from that, it has tons of content that can suffice almost any sort of interest from fashion, culture, cooking, politics, etc. Therefore, it is not that difficult to find something that can be of interest to the students. Most of them are already watching *YouTube* videos at home and are very well oriented on how to use it.

*Some activities where you can use YouTube in class:*

1. **Asian Boss Videos** – This channel in *YouTube* is a great way to introduce social issues and current events not just in Japan but also in other Asian countries. The channel's mission is to bridge social and cultural gaps by giving voices to real people from Asia through street interviews and story-telling. It is in mix of Japanese and English (with subtitles) enabling students to understand fully what the topic or issue is at hand. Topics are often controversial and opinions by the interviewees often resonate with that of the students. By utilizing the videos in this channel, I conduct group or individual activities that encourage them to discuss the issues deeper. For example, for group activities, I instruct them to choose a video, that they find interesting and then I create a simple worksheet that asks 3 main questions: 1. What is the topic about? 2. What are the common answers of the respondents? 3. What is your personal opinion about it? These questions may sound intimidating at first especially for lower level EFL learners since their vocabulary is limited but it can also be a good opportunity to practice the grammar structure and vocabulary for expressing opinions as well as to promote critical thinking.
2. **Top 10 things to do in...** There are a lot of videos on *Youtube* about traveling, people who posts about their travels are very diverse and not just limited to a specific nationality. I find this a good avenue to introduce world *Englishes* I encourage my students to choose videos not just posted by Americans or British but also *Youtubers* from other nationalities like Chinese or Korean or African, this way they get to listen to not just American or British accent but also other people's accent.

For a group activity, I direct my students to **first**; choose a video in *Youtube* that has a title that starts with: *Top 10 things to do in...* (e.g. in Korea, London, or could be in a Museum or in Temple in Seoul) **then** they fill out a worksheet divided into three columns: ( see reference). The students can share their work with the whole class or if a pair activity they can share it in a group depending on class size.

*Table 1: Sample Worksheet*

What I find surprising in this video is/ are (list)	What is similar in Japan from this video?	What I find really interesting in this video is/are...
1. 2. 3.		1. 2. 3.

3. **TabiEats.** This channel in *YouTube* is hosted by two Japanese LGBTQ+ couple who shares their passion for food and travel and what they love to do, they post content about food adventures and reviews, recipes and many others. They both speak very good English and also mix it up with some Japanese. I find it a very good material to introduce to my students some LGBTQ+ issues in Japan, the use of the video content provides a laid-back low-pressure environment for such a discussion. Most of my students who watch the videos enjoyed it and admire the hosts for being an openly gay couple in Tokyo. I take that as a good sign and an indication that given the right information and awareness Japanese students can be very accepting and non-judgmental towards the LGBTQ+ community.

Another activity that I have conducted using this video content is by letting the students watch an example video and have them eventually do their own *Youtube* videos. It can be around a specific topic like “My Favorite Snacks from Familymart” or a cross-cultural video theme like “Amazing Food you can only try in...” It is important to note that some students may feel reluctant to do a video of themselves, in such case you can opt to tell them that a voice over would do just fine.

## CONCLUSION

EFL classes with access to the necessary technology can take advantage of the social media apps like *Twitter* and *Youtube* in their EFL classes to develop student’s cultural competence and English literacy skills. However, we must consider certain limitations. Watkins and Wilkins (2011) surmise that given the vastness of the content of the apps such as YouTube library, structuring and guidance from the teacher is necessary in order to avoid students from spending unproductive hours using the site while in class. In addition, time management of the activities I have suggested should also be well noted in consideration with the student’s proficiency level. Based from my observations the lower level proficiency students might take longer in completing the activities and will need continuous guidance as they proceed, whereas higher level students can fully do the tasks independently without much guidance apart from occasional clarifications. One more thing that needs to be taken into account is the nature of material available on *YouTube and Twitter*. Although the site does not allow nudity, there is a fair amount of risqué content and provocative language available. Teachers of younger students would be well advised to take this into account. (Watkins and Wilkins, 2011). Despite these limitations *Twitter* and *YouTube* are still valid resources for teaching EFL and cultural competence in EFL classrooms given the nature of

its content and its ease of access as well as the breadth of ideas for tasks that can be derived from it. I recommend further studies on learner's perceptions on the use of *YouTube* in the EFL class, Additionally *Twitter* topics as conversation drivers in group speaking tasks can also be further assessed in terms of its effect on student's motivation.

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