

## Promoting Your Department and Practice with Twitter

Crystal Bock Thiessen  
University of Nebraska, Lincoln

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**Abstract.** Intensive English Programs (IEPs) constantly find themselves in an ongoing battle for their legitimacy and relevancy throughout many university campuses in the United States. The often overlooked professional development demands and multicultural endeavors in which ESL instructors partake, coupled with our current social and political climate, makes it imperative that IEPs and English language instructors take on the promotion of their important work on campus and with our international English language learners themselves. Fortunately, with the prevalence of social media, Twitter in particular, it is easier and more accessible for English language professionals and departments to demonstrate that what they do extends greatly beyond teaching.

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### Introduction

Caught somewhere between a required hurdle for many international students on their way to college admission in the United States and a vital university department, Intensive English Programs (IEPs) constantly find themselves in an ongoing battle for their legitimacy and relevancy throughout many university campuses in the United States. While ESL instructors often do not have the research demands placed upon them that their colleagues on campus do, balancing assigned English language classes, designing new courses, and engaging in professional development endeavors are key parts of their jobs. International students have a myriad of cultural, academic, and adaptation issues with which IEP instructors constantly and effectively help, which is a heavy service component to their teaching that many times goes unrecognized (Eaton, 2013). IEP classes are generally not offered for academic credit and the profession of teaching English as a second or foreign language is often misunderstood as only needing to have native or near-native command of the English language in order to teach it, which can serve in “further distancing it from the academic mainstream” (Heyen, 2016, p. 9).

This seemingly isolationist position, coupled with our current social and political climate, makes it imperative that IEPs and English language instructors take on the promotion of their important work on campus and with our international English language learners themselves.

Fortunately, with the prevalence of social media, Twitter in particular, it is easier and more accessible for English language professionals and departments to demonstrate that what they do extends greatly beyond teaching.

### Twitter Overview

Twitter is a social media microblogging platform on which users post information and connect through short posts known as Tweets. Implementing a limitation of 280 characters per Tweet “promotes [a] focused and clever use of language” that is both personal and quickly digestible, and which has contributed greatly to its popularity all over the world (Gil, 2018). In a sense, Twitter is a perfect blend of informative posts and instant messaging that gets your information out and spreads it throughout a very connected network quickly (Figure 1). This format is especially useful to educators as it gives access to a wide variety of people, departments, and organizations (Carpender & Krutka, 2014), providing an easy platform on which to build professional relationships that would ordinarily be more difficult to foster.

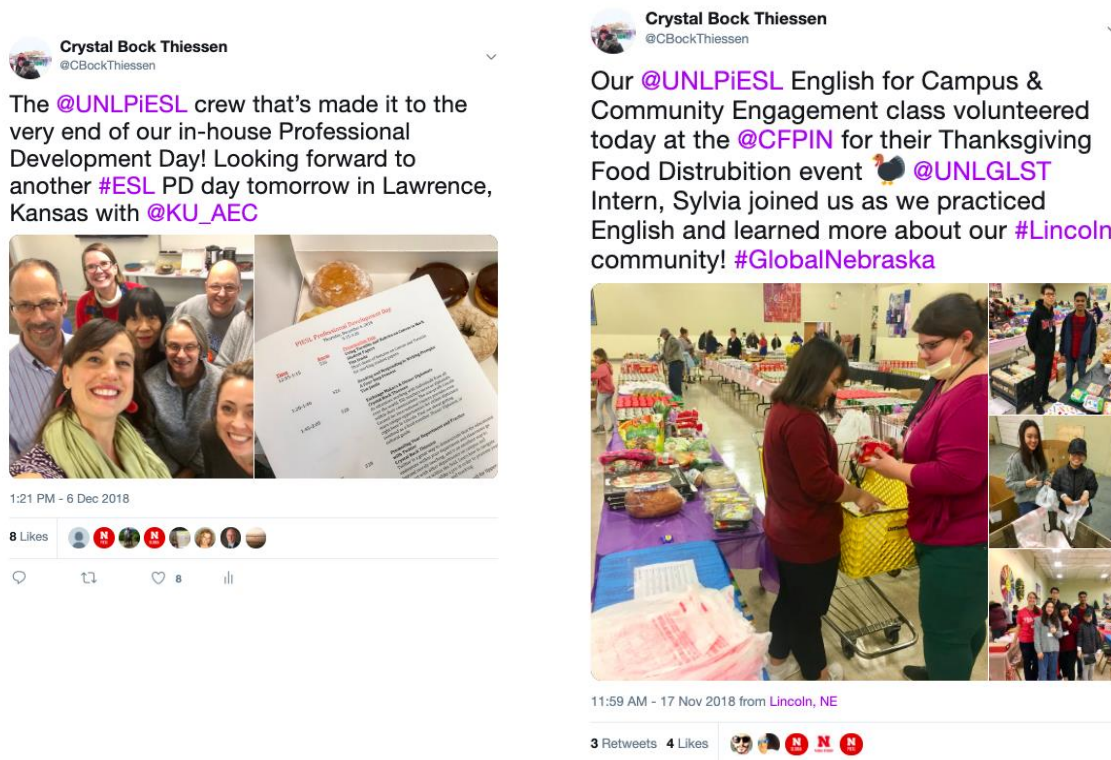


Figure 1. Example Twitter Posts from the Author. Posts can instantly showcase activities as well as connect with other entities and individuals.

### Tweeting Away the Educational Hierarchy

Being an engaged contributor and participant on Twitter in an ESL community of practice and in a university’s Twitter network has the power to propel educators’ status and recognition despite the predisposed academic hierarchies that have traditionally existed. Adjunct

instructors, college deans, and university chancellors have equal opportunities to showcase their involvement, and a lack of physical barriers on Twitter makes it easy to professionally connect despite the difference in titles and personal access. In the case of our IEPs and the English language teaching profession as a whole, Twitter provides an opportunity for a marginalized profession to gain a larger voice and presence. Bringing transparency to workloads and showcasing just what, exactly, English language instruction entails is one of the biggest benefits of using Twitter professionally, and actively using a Twitter account goes a long way in showing that IEPs are modern and relevant places of learning and globalization (Herrmann, 2015).

### **Twitter Demystified**

Whenever teachers gathered in a room are asked to raise their hands if they have a Twitter account, more than half the arms go up. When further asked how many of them are active within this account at least once a week, more often than not, all but a very few go down. Twitter's pervasiveness can be quite intimidating to teachers who are not regularly on social media. For those who are already quite proficient with Facebook, the differences on Twitter and the tendency to view Twitter through a dense Facebook-oriented lens can make it seem confusing, impenetrable, and "just one more thing to learn."

Creating a network and presence on Twitter for professional exposure, however, is really just a matter of three easy steps that can be broken down into stages (Figure 2). The first one is the easiest: Twitter users should follow people, departments, and organizations they are interested in. Creating a space on Twitter that is actually interesting to view is important. When scrolling through snippets of news, information, and updates from relevant sources, the user will be more likely to continue to open up the Twitter app.

When ready to craft Tweets, start small. A retweet of content or a simple photo of student projects or presentations, along with a comment, is the first step in really building a presence on the site. Twitter is all about showcasing moments in the moment and connecting with others who are interested in the content or who can connect with it as well. The use of handles (otherwise known as usernames and denoted with the @ symbol in front of it) and hashtags (which serve as organizational or topical folders and use the # symbol) will take Tweets up to the next level in terms of connecting with others. Following other users and noticing how they craft their posts will start to give a good idea of what constitutes a good or bad Tweet, and the Twitter novice will begin to see how handles and hashtags are integrated into the body of a Tweet to maximize content and connect with others.

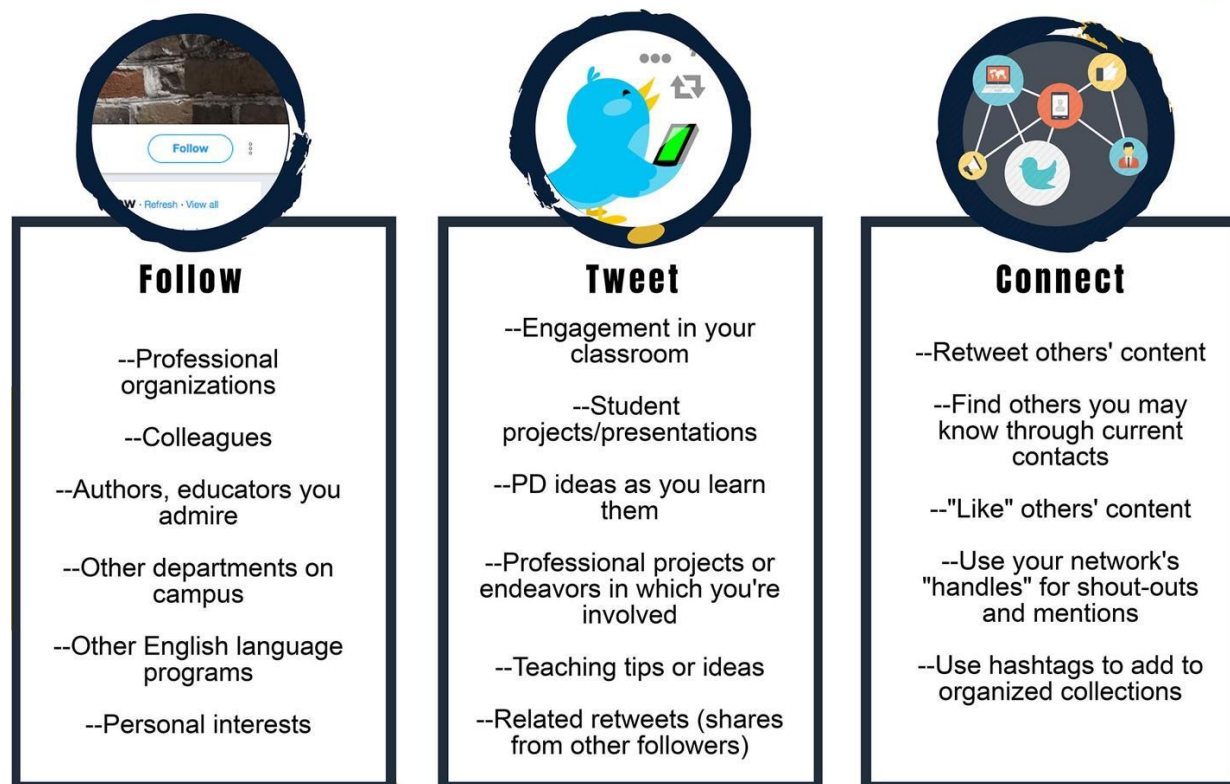


Figure 2. Three Steps to Interacting on Twitter.

It is important to have specific goals in mind for professional Twitter accounts in order to have effective promotion and engagement. The ESL professional and the IEP cannot be everything to all people and it is important to avoid trying to. At the same time, one can showcase various moments of teaching, service, and activities on a regular basis. Setting goals about with whom to connect and how will help to keep content focused and ensure effective promotion of academic endeavors. To further help keep professional activity focused, construct Tweets with the following three questions in mind:

1. *What exactly is it that you want to showcase?* Remember, you are restricted to 280 characters and up to four photos.
2. *With whom do you want to directly connect your content?* What handles, if any, will you use to directly connect to specific people or organizations? Is there anyone that your Tweet will specifically benefit in a positive light?
3. *What do you want people to do with your Tweet?* Is this Tweet to get someone's attention so that they'll follow you? Do you want them to re-tweet this information? Are you just looking for a like (acknowledgement)?

Just like any form of social media, becoming confident and adept at using Twitter to showcase and connect the IEP with teacher practice, and interact regularly with it as well, will take practice and a commitment to learning how best to use it.

## **Reminders for Professional Twitter Use**

Freedom from restrictive grammar and spelling rules and formatting helps to give professional and departmental posts a modern and authentic voice, but there are a few things that are important to keep in mind when using this platform. First of all, in order to get followed and get “likes,” personal and departmental accounts will need to follow and “like” others as well. This will ensure an extensive network in which to engage. Secondly, timeliness is of the utmost importance in this day and age; therefore, Twitter posts should be as current as possible to reflect ongoing involvement. The social media community seeks to engage with content that is not only relevant, but current. When there is something Tweet-worthy happening in the IEP or profession, get it out as soon as possible. The very composition of Twitter, with its short 280-character and four-photo limits, means that content is dense and made to be swiftly consumed, so it is important to get information out there before it is old news.

We have all seen posts that are almost all hyperlinked handles and hashtags—they are impossible to read and do not serve well in connecting with others. An unspoken and general rule for professional posts is to stick to one to three hashtags and handles per Tweet for maximum readability and increased likelihood of engagement from others. It is important to connect via handles in Tweets when possible to increase one’s network and exposure, but it is best to avoid over-using the same people and organizations in Tweets when possible. Twitter functions just like any other networking space or opportunity in that connections should be meaningful and personal, but not overbearing.

## **Conclusion**

Twitter has positioned itself as one of the most prevalent forms of promotion and networking in the 21st century, and both IEPs and English language educators can benefit greatly from learning how to use it to their advantage. Its immediacy and personalization make it an approachable and contemporary platform to learn and to use. Many professional and academic networks that would otherwise be hard to permeate become easily accessible on Twitter. In striving for legitimacy and relevancy of IEPs and English language education on university campuses, keeping content on Twitter interesting, relevant, and engaging, will reflect well on the English language educator as well as the university’s IEP.

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