

Introducing Podcasts into Language Teaching

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Abstract

Technology is an increasing part of everyday life, and with every advance, educators are faced with the challenge of harnessing this potential. Yet using new technology in the classroom poses many difficulties. This paper posits that one of the latest phenomena born out of digital technology, podcasting, can be used effectively for language learning purposes. We start with a broad look at the background to podcasting before outlining a practical project that involves language learners creating their own podcasts in a university setting. After researching the practical implications and potential linguistic and learning benefits of this new technology, it is felt that podcasts can have a positive impact on language learners. By setting up projects such as the one outlined in this paper, it is hoped the most effective way of realizing these learning benefits can be implemented.

What is a Podcast?

The term podcast first appeared in an article in the Guardian Newspaper on February 12th, 2004 as an amalgamation of two words: the name of the popular MP3 player, iPod, and the word 'broadcast'. This, however, is a misnomer in that it suggests that one needs an iPod to listen to podcasts. In fact a computer with an Internet connection and any portable MP3 player will give access to the

fast-developing world of podcasts.

To put it simply, a Podcast is a series of audio or video files on the web, which can be cataloged and then automatically downloaded to a personal audio player (Van Orden, 2005). These files are commonly in MP3 format, and are then available for listening to at the user's convenience. Much like weblogs (or blogs), which present the thoughts of an individual in written form, a podcast can do the same, but in spoken form. Increasingly, video files are being made available for on-demand downloading, and these files are usually referred to as Vodcasts or vidcasts. In this paper, the term podcast is used as an umbrella term to refer to both audio and video files unless otherwise stated.

Whilst this may not seem new — audio and video files have been available on the Internet for a long time now — the difference is in the way these files are delivered to computers. The underlying technology is referred to as RSS 2.0 news feed, which is XML format. Users simply log on to a podcasting subscription service, such as iTunes, and 'subscribe' to that site's feeds. Audio content is then automatically loaded onto the user's computer when it is uploaded, or published, to the Internet. As additional content is made available, it too is automatically downloaded, without the user needing to check websites for updates.

And much of this is free with the only limitation on how many feeds one can subscribe to being bandwidth. Anyone with an idea for a show and with Internet access can become a podcaster, reaching a potentially global audience. For the listener, it gives a rich and diverse choice of podcasts available for listening when and where one wishes. Ironically, an excellent explanation of podcasting, and one which assisted this article, is available online as a video podcast from 'Podgrunt' (Syverson, 2007).

Who is Podcasting?

This is where the potential of this media becomes evident, since podcast-

ing can involve practically anyone with an Internet connection. Professional broadcasters have made their shows available as podcasts, whilst amateurs are flocking to share their opinions and shows. Be it businesses, educational institutions, advertising groups, political parties or simply an individual with an idea, podcasting puts them all on a level footing and gives them all a chance to have their voices heard.

The Rapid Development of Podcasting

In a very short period of time podcasting has developed from an unknown entity to “one of the most exciting and wonderfully disruptive technologies to emerge in recent history” (Geoghegan & Klass, 2005). In 2005, The New Oxford American Dictionary had selected ‘podcast’ as word of the year. In that same year, Geoghegan & Klass (2005) indicated that “podcasting puts the power to communicate into the hands of the individuals. Thousands (at the time of the writing of this book) of people are already involved, each as unique as their podcast....” Now, just a few years later, it is impossible to indicate exactly how many podcasts are available, as thousands are being added daily.

Podcasting at Universities

In a University setting, educators have been experimenting with this powerful new opportunity and discovering new ways to reach their audience. The variety of applications for podcasting has seen a variety of approaches taken. Duke University (2004), under the banner of the Duke Digital Initiative (DDI), gave all freshmen an iPod at the beginning of their studies in 2004, “to stimulate creative uses of digital technology in academic and campus life”. In Fall 2006, the DDI supported 1470 students and 81 faculty in 75 designated iPod courses.

San Diego State University has recently commenced a course titled ‘Educational Podcasting’ whilst at the University of Oregon, the School of Architec-

ture and Allied Arts created a 'Faculty Lecture Series' of podcasts to emphasize the research and concepts established by its faculty members. These podcasts are all open to the public. The University of Missouri, in a White paper on podcasting and vodcasting (2005), state that "they will be immediately adopted by the current class of students" and conclude that "the portable and on-demand nature of podcasting and vodcasting make them technologies worth pursuing, implementing and supporting".

Any quick search will find thousands of podcasts available in Higher Education.

Podcasting for Teachers

Teachers interested in podcasting have at their disposal a strong educational tool, which goes hand in hand with portable audio players, the current 'must-have item' amongst teenagers and young adults. It is also cheap and easy to set up and the teacher can have control over the content. If required, the podcasts can be limited to certain groups of students only, giving these groups 'ownership' of their podcasts.

Podcasting for Language Teachers

A language teacher can design the content of each podcast to meet the needs of the students, and provide for their exact level of proficiency. Since the content can be 'personalized', that is it can relate directly to the students' academic life, there is a greater chance that the students would become involved, not only by listening in to new podcasts, but also by contributing to the creation of subsequent podcasts. Thus collaborative learning can take place. The material is, moreover, authentic, new and original. "Educators are starting to see how podcasting can help hone students' vocabulary, writing, editing, public speaking, and presentation skills", says Dan J. Schmit (cited by Borja, 2005), an instructional-technology specialist at the University of Nebraska's College of

Education. This is indeed an attractive proposition for the faculty and students at J. F. Oberlin University.

Podcasting for Students

For students there are several aspects of this new technology that make it appealing. Firstly, MP3 players are trendy, easy to use and students have them with them most of the time. Secondly, the students themselves have control over what they are listening to. They can choose when and where they want to listen, can pause, fast forward or rewind as they wish or can delete shows if they don't like them.

For foreign language students there are also several pedagogical advantages. Podcasts can help:

- Assist auditory learners. Podcasting is perfect for learners who prefer to take in information aurally.
- Improve Reading and Writing. Since many podcasts are supported by a website, students can be guided to transcripts of the show, can provide online comments or take part in quizzes and surveys, all in the target language. In fact, the new generation iPods allow you to view an uploaded transcript while you listen.
- Provide an opportunity for language learning outside the classroom. Students can listen to their podcasts anywhere.
- Increase authentic native language. Podcasts give access to real language used in a real setting. This can assist pronunciation and listening skills.
- Broaden IT skills. Students may not know about podcasts, or the wide variety that is available to them. Having 'ownership' of a podcast may lead students to finding other language learning sites and opportunities.
- Increase motivation. A podcast uses the foreign language as a medium

to share information rather than as a linguistic instructional tool per se. Language learning thus becomes a by-product of the podcast.

Suggested format

After recognizing the pedagogical benefits of podcasting for language learning, it was decided to introduce this technology by setting up a podcast publishing task for language learners at J. F. Oberlin University. Short-term goals are to see if it could be run smoothly, to observe any linguistic benefits the students might gain, and to gauge the students' reaction to the process. Students would be asked to produce, record, edit and publish twice-monthly podcasts focused on campus life along the lines of a college radio show. Being a podcast, the show would be available for students to subscribe to through RSS feeds or to download on or off campus. It would also bring the students and teachers together in a collaborative effort guided by the teacher, but in the main, produced by the students. Below is a suggested outline for each of the podcast shows.

Practical Goal:

To produce and publish two fifteen to twenty-minute podcasts in a second language each month during each semester: potentially 14 to 15 weeks of classes with seven to eight podcasts.

Show format:

- Introduction and Look Back at the Week - approximately 5 minutes: greetings, talking about the weekend or past news, commenting on events that happened recently on campus.
- Stinger*
- Outline of the Show - approximately 1 minute: a look at what will be on the show.
- Interview jingle

- Spotlight Interview - approximately 4 to 6 minutes
 - Stinger
 - What's Coming Up jingle
 - What's Coming Up - approximately 4 to 6 minutes: to highlight some upcoming campus-related events, such as concerts, sports games, exhibitions and so on.
 - Campus Voice - a collection of opinions to one specific question
 - Stinger
 - Goodbye
- * A stinger is a short sound or musical phrase used to punctuate the show.

This format should be followed for each podcast. Doing so will provide a scaffold for learners, giving the top-down support necessary to understand the linguistic content. In each show, the listeners will know what to expect from each section and will therefore have the burden of listening comprehension lessened. The different sections also provide a variety of linguistic input for the listeners in terms of grammatical structures. Primarily, the Look Back at the Week will feature the past aspect, while Outline of the Show and What's Coming Up will involve the future aspect. The Spotlight Interview will have a mix of grammatical tenses. In this way, listeners will know what to expect and will also be able to focus on particular structures.

Ideally, an elective class would be added to the curriculum, and the show would be produced by students taking this class, 'English Through Technology', for example. At J. F. Oberlin there are elective classes that deal with language and technology, which would be ideal for this kind of project. The benefits of having an elective class integrated into the curriculum are many: for example, scheduled contact hours, a potentially larger pool of students to divide assignments between, and the reward for students of credits on completion of the course. Beyond these, however, it would mean that there would be guaranteed content throughout the school year.

If there are no classes that could run the podcast, then a second option would be to take advantage of any campus language clubs. In the case of English, most Japanese universities have an English Circle run by students, which would provide a pool of motivated students. A third option would be to recruit, through advertising on campus and by approaching students directly, especially in the language departments. The last two options would necessitate the teacher or teachers to play a more prominent organizing role. As the podcast shows could be produced by as few as two students, not having an elective class should not be a problem and may be a good way to test run the project before taking it to the school administration to have it added to the curriculum.

Once a group of students has been gathered the teacher will need to delegate and act as the overall producer of the shows. The students will be involved in three main skill strands: linguistic skills, gathering appropriate and interesting content, and handling the technology needed to put the podcasts together.

Linguistic Benefits

As podcasts are primarily audio shows, the students involved in making them must concentrate on pronunciation and intonation when recording interviews or the other sections in the studio. Since they will be able to playback and listen to their recordings and edit them or re-record them, the project should provide ample focused practice on pronunciation. In addition, a large part of the show will involve creating scripts for interviews and other sections of the show. Again, the students will benefit from being able to prepare the language they will use with the advice and help of the teacher before recording.

Skills through Gathering Content

Students will need to provide the content for the show. They should have little difficulty in finding personalities on campus for the ‘Spotlight Interview’ section, and, being students themselves, they should have a good idea of what

is happening on campus to have enough material to talk about in the 'What's Coming Up' and 'Look Back at the Week' sections. As Vincent (2007) indicates, "The process of putting together an audio recording is extremely valuable and is certainly a cross-curricular experience". Real world skills involved will include: Time management, as students will need to plan their time carefully to meet recording, editing and publishing deadlines; Students will be involved in creating storyboards, negotiating content, working co-operatively and dividing tasks effectively. All of these skills will obviously be useful to students after they graduate.

Technology Skills

Potentially the most challenging part of the project is the amount of technology involved in the whole publishing process. The teacher will have to be conversant with the appropriate technologies in order to assist students. Students will practice basic computer skills as they create and save files, and word-processing skills as they create scripts. Moreover, they will learn more advanced computer skills such as audio editing, and Internet publishing. Learning how to use the hardware and software will again increase students' skills and help them in the workplace.

What technology is needed?

Podcasting is surprisingly easy, and good quality programmes can be made with readily available technology. Below, is a basic list of the required software and hardware.

- A host site: The project can get Internet space through the university server, but can also be hosted on iWeb through a .Mac account.
- Website design software: There are a number of website design softwares available, but Wordpress is free and is a powerful blogging soft-

ware with a podcast-publishing plug-in called PodPress. Alternatively, Macintosh computers come with iWeb installed, which also has an easy podcast publishing function if the user has a .Mac account.

- Software for editing audio: Garageband is an easy and intuitive audio editing software that has a podcast function with a large selection of jingles and stingers available. Audion is also popular amongst podcasters.
- Hardware: hand held recorders (Microtracks), digital video recorders (for vodcasts), and Macintosh computers or PCs, preferably laptops.

Conclusion

Podcasting is a new and exciting technology. It is easy to use, can be listened to at any time and basically anywhere and has the potential to reach a global audience. Today's generation of teenagers and young adults have already embraced this technology and as more and more material is becoming available, so too is its popularity advancing. In the field of education, teachers have experimented, with many reporting great success, in engaging students and providing student-centered, motivating course content. Universities, too, have come up with novel ways to meet the challenge of providing for today's students accustomed to receiving 'on-demand' content. It is felt that the students of J. F. Oberlin University will enjoy having their 'own' podcast created by their peers. It will also take English out of the classroom and into the real world. The benefits of this will be widespread.

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