Foreword

The advent of the iPod in 2001 has resulted in explosive growth in the use of a variety of portable electronic devices (e.g., iPods and smartphones). The use of portable electronic devices in general may also represent one of the distinguishing characteristics of today's generation of students. It is difficult to walk across a college campus without seeing students equipped with earbuds and wires connected to some kind of portable electronic device. Since 2005, podcasting—in its simplest form, the distribution and downloading of digital media via the web—has experienced growth similar to that of iPods. Even a cursory review of websites listing podcasts reveals a vast spectrum of podcasts on almost every conceivable topic; some have been produced by commercial entities with professional recording equipment (e.g., news broadcasts or entertainment series), and others have been created by private individuals with hand-held video cameras (e.g., family events or personal travelogues). As the technology underlying podcasting evolves and becomes easier to use, it is expected that the development of podcasting materials will progress at an even more rapid pace.

Podcasting, along with blogs, wikis, and popular social-networking websites such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, is often considered to be one of the integral elements of what is commonly called the Web 2.0. However, podcasting has the potential to significantly extend the reach of Web 2.0 activities because of the ease with which users can download podcasts on portable electronic devices connected to the internet. Within the context of education, podcasting also lends itself particularly well to the support of distance learning because, again, of the ease with which students can download and interact with course materials. As distance education continues to grow, whether in the form of completely online or partially online courses, podcasting seems destined to play an even greater role in students' learning in the future.

The use of educational podcasts on portable electronic devices has given rise to the notion of mobile learning, or m-learning. M-learning allows students, untethered from desktop computers, to use learning materials on different portable electronic devices and represents a new dimension in anytime/anywhere learning. Within the field of computer-assisted language learning (CALL), m-learning has come to constitute a new subfield, mobile assisted language learning (MALL; see Shield & Kukulska-Hulme, 2008) in which podcasting is the fundamental means of the delivery of language learning materials.

MALL is a relatively young discipline, and, because it is relatively young, basic questions about the use of language learning podcasts in MALL abound. Even the meaning of the term "podcasting" is not completely free of ambiguity. Early on, one of the essential features of podcasts was the use of procedures to notify podcast subscribers of the availability of new podcasts by means of a really simple syndication (RSS) feed. However, some developers now refer to podcasting as any distribution of downloadable digital materials with or without a notifying RSS feed.
Some of the other questions that remain to be addressed in empirical and systematic ways include the following: For which areas of second language acquisition is podcasting the most useful: listening, speaking, reading, or writing? How can podcasting advance the learning of culture? If learners’ interaction with materials is an essential component in language learning, how can podcasting maximize this interactivity? Will students actually use podcasts on portable electronic devices for language learning purposes or will they continue to prefer playing podcasts for entertainment purposes? Will portable electronic devices be able to supplant desktop computers as the primary means of viewing language learning podcasts? As in distance education in general, can we assume that learners will be able to take responsibility for their learning in MALL? How does one actually go about making and distributing podcasts? What are the technical or logistical problems associated with their development? How can podcasting be integrated into other MALL instructional processes? How can the effectiveness of podcasts be evaluated?

The chapters in this volume address these and other questions. They take an honest look at the advantages and disadvantages of podcasting in MALL, underscoring the immense potential of podcasting and proposing solutions for the challenges involved in creating and distributing podcasts. As a whole, the volume bears witness to the progress that podcasting has made over the past 5 years and suggests future directions for podcasting as MALL matures as a discipline.

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REFERENCE