Podcasting and Language Learning

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INTRODUCTION

The second generation of Web known as Web 2.0 has opened up new possibilities of interactive publishing, networking, and collaborating (Warschauer & Grimes, 2007) through its unique tools such as blogging, wikis, social network sites, and podcasting. From among Web 2.0 technological tools, podcasting has exclusive pedagogical benefits as it promotes mobile learning and “allow[s] learners to vary their study location and to study on the move” (Evans, 2008, p. 492). Further, podcasts have enormous potential to reduce students’ learning anxiety (Chan & Lee, 2005), enhance learning outcome (Cebeci & Tekdal, 2006) and increase engagement in class activities (Edirisingha & Salmon, 2007).

Podcasts have been found to be very useful in language classes because in addition to their general educational values, they contribute substantially to the development of language competence especially listening skill (Lee, 2007). In spite of the widespread use of podcasts for educational purposes, podcasts and their potential for language classes are still unknown to many language teachers especially in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) setting. It is a common fallacy among many teachers that producing and publishing e-content is not an easy task and many doubt if the payoff is worth the effort. Research shows when end-users of technology (e.g., students and teachers) become familiar with technological tools and applications, their negative attitude lowers and they show more willingness to take advantage of technology and its educational benefits (Rahimi & Yadollahi, 2011).

The aim of the present article is thus threefold. First, the podcast technology is defined and its educational value is discussed. Second, the role of podcasting in language education and different types of podcasts will be described; and simple guidelines will be provided to help readers understand how podcasts are made. Finally, the research direction of using podcasting in language teaching/learning will be addressed.

BACKGROUND

Web 2.0 marks a significant shift from read-only applications of Web 1.0 to content sharing ‘social software’ that enables communication, collaboration, and interaction among Internet users. Web 2.0 is “a platform for simple, lightweight services that leverage social interactions for communication, collaboration, and creating, remixing and sharing content” (Becta, 2008). Students use Web 2.0 to create and recreate the content with a do-it-yourself and open source approach (Lorenzo, Oblinger, & Dziuban, 2007). They often take the existing material, change it with their own words (by adding or deleting), and then republish it. The activities associated with Web 2.0 realize four human dispositions including (Crook, 2008, pp. 7-8)

- **Socializing the Playful:** Games and virtual worlds;
- **Socializing the Expressive:** Media design, sharing, and publication;
- **Socializing the Reflective:** Blogs, social networks, and wikis; and
- **Socializing the Exploratory:** Syndication, recommenders, and folksonomies.

There are strong links between Web 2.0 and socio-cultural theories of learning (Selwyn, 2008) which emphasize the dynamic nature of the interplay between teachers, learners, tasks, and contexts (Williams & Burden, 1997). In this framework we see “active and authentic learning taking place best where knowledge can be constructed actively by learners who are supported in communal social settings” (Selwyn, 2008, p. 10).

Web 2.0 supports the learning concepts of collaboration, publication, literacies, and inquiry (Crook, 2008). There are many Internet applications which embody these Web 2.0 qualities including social
networking, wikis, blogs, and podcasting. Students’
everyday engagement with these applications has
called for the integration of Web 2.0 in education. It
is suggested that using Web 2.0 in education promotes
informal and lifelong learning (Dohn, 2009), facilitates
and enhances student learning (Bennet, et al., 2012),
and creates positive attitudes towards learning among
students (Rahimi & Miri, 2014).

Language teachers use Web 2.0 applications for
teaching and practicing a variety of materials. While
wiki and blogging are mostly used for teaching and prac-
ticing written language skills (e.g., Li, 2011; Rahimi
& Miri, 2014), podcasting has been used to improve
oral language skills (e.g., O’Bryan & Hegelheimer,
2007; Ducate, & Lomicka, 2009). Podcasting is widely
used in language classes due to its convenient, portable
and easy to use format, attractiveness, low cost; and
capability to personalize learning with different types
of activity (Rosell-Aguilar, 2013).

The Definition of Podcasting

Podcasts are audio files commonly in mp3 format that
can be played by a number of portable media players
such as laptops, tablets, and cellphones (Rahimi &
Katal, 2012). Podcasts are first made with media player
software and then are uploaded to available podcast
hosting services on the Internet by the author. Podcasts
combine “the benefits of the broadcast nature of radio
with the flexibility, learner control and personaliza-
tion afforded by recorded audio” (Chan & Lee, 2005,
p. 64-65).

Anyone who is interested in the podcast can
download it on his/her media player device or desktop
computer to be listened to at a convenient time and
place. Podcasts can also be automatically downloaded
using the RSS feed (Really Simple Syndication). This
means that the users can subscribe to a podcast hosting
service and then every time there is an update or new
content, it will be downloaded on the users’ devices
automatically. RSS saves the time of the users, as there
is no need for them to monitor the websites for updates
(Evans, 2008). Podcast has three key characteristics
(Lee, Miller, & Newnham, 2009, p. 53):

- It uses file-based downloads. As opposed to
  streaming, which by definition means playing
  the media as it downloads, podcast files are
downloaded entirely before they are consumed;
- It is subscription-based. The user pre-selects
  one or more feeds or channels of his/her choice
  and podcasts are automatically “pushed” to his/
  her computer on a regular schedule;
- The content is consumed on portable devices,
such as dedicated MP3 players (including but not
limited to iPods), mobile phones, as well as
personal digital assistants (PDAs) that have
MP3 playback capabilities.

Podcasts have experienced growing recognition
and use by Internet users due to the pervasiveness of
the Internet, the fast growth of broadband, the creation
and availability of multimedia personal computers, the
blurring of streaming and downloading media, and
the rapid adoption of portable MP3 playback devices
(Campbell, 2005).

Educational Value of Podcasts

Podcasts are generally used in higher education to
provide students with information on administrative
issues (administrative podcasts), special lectures and
seminars (special lecture series podcasts), course
lectures (the traditional classroom lecture podcasts,
also called substitutional podcasts, if they substitute
classroom lectures) (Voge & Gard, 2006), or addi-
tional materials for classroom teachings (supplementary
podcasts). Students can also make their own materials
to be shared by other students (student generated or
creative podcasts) (Heilesen, 2010). Podcasting helps
to disseminate course content, capture live classroom
material, and enhance studying (Donnelly & Berge,
2006). Some uses of podcasting in education include
(Sloan, 2005, slide 12)

- For distance learning
- To facilitate self-paced learning
- For remediation of slower learners
- To allow faculty to offer advanced and/or high-
ly motivated learners extra content
- For helping students with reading and/or other
learning disabilities
- For multi-lingual education
- To provide the ability for educators to feature
guest speakers from remote locations