Podcasts and English-Language Learning: A Qualitative Investigation of Organizational, Instructional, and Learning Perspectives

Yuping Mao, California State University – Long Beach, USA
Martin Guardado, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Canada
Kevin R. Meyer, Illinois State University, USA

ABSTRACT

There are three ways to use podcasts in education: accessing podcasts created by others, teacher-created podcasts, and student-created podcasts. This chapter focuses on the use of teacher-created and student-created podcasts in an English as a second language (ESL) class. Existing literature on the use of podcasts in learning primarily focuses on formal educational settings, while nontraditional students in freely available language programs provided by non-profit organizations (NPOs) remain unexplored. Thus, the authors examine how podcasting enhances immigrants’ English language learning experience in an ESL course offered by an NPO that provides community services to immigrants in Canada. This chapter addresses pedagogical and organizational affordances and challenges of using podcasts in language learning and provides recommendations for their implementation in NPOs.

KEYWORDS
Communication Apprehension, Cultural Influences, English as a Second Language, English-Language Learning, Immigrants, Non-Profit Organization, Podcasts, Technology Apprehension

INTRODUCTION

Podcasts are audio files that can be played on the computer or downloaded to other digital audio devices (Sprague & Pixley, 2008). This study focuses on the use of teacher- and student-created podcasts in an English as a second language (ESL) program. Existing literature on podcasts in learning mainly focuses on student experiences in formal educational settings, while questions related to nontraditional students in freely-available language programs provided by non-profit organizations (NPOs) remain unexplored. Thus, this research examines how podcasting enhances the English learning experiences of students in an ESL course offered by a NPO that provides community services to new Canadians.

The community service center examined in this study is a NPO with over 30 years’ history in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, serving thousands of immigrants annually, with the majority of their service recipients being Chinese immigrants, and providing a wide range of services that help immigrants integrate into Canadian society linguistically, culturally, and socially. English language training is a priority among the services provided by the organization. With newly acquired external funding, this organization was able to set up a computer lab for English language training. Podcasting, as an innovative pedagogical tool, was applied in two ESL courses with a focus on pronunciation. The first session of the pronunciation course consisted of low-level beginners, and was offered for
four weeks, five days a week. The second session lasted for 11 weeks, meeting once or twice a week for two or three hours, and was made up of intermediate to high-level language learners. The two sessions, consisting of mostly Chinese students, shared the same instructor. The majority of students in the first session were senior citizens with limited educational background. Students in the second session were mainly in their 30s or 40s, and had a higher formal education level. The instructional objectives of the two sessions differed due to the different learning needs of students.

The NPO’s initial objective in designing this podcasting project was to address an identified need to support the development of speaking and reading skills in their ESL programs, and to promote autonomous learning by giving students a tool, podcasts, which they could take home and listen to at their leisure. Using Audacity software, the instructor recorded and uploaded the podcasts, after which the students downloaded, listened to, and re-recorded in their own voices using the instructor’s pronunciation as a model, which allowed clear comparison of their own pronunciation to the instructor’s. Class time was divided into two parts. In the first 90 minutes, the instructor introduced new material to students, and the students later practiced individually with Audacity software on the computer. The use of podcasts in language training in a NPO, such as the community service center examined in this study, holds the potential to improve instructional effectiveness in different ways and deserves greater research attention.

The article discusses instructional and organizational benefits as well as the challenges of applying podcasts in language training. By triangulating the experiences of the program coordinators, instructor, and students, we are able to assess the effectiveness of such a program and offer recommendations for similar programs in the future. This project adds to the body of literature on the use of computer and online technologies in language acquisition by providing a contextualized understanding of an accessible learning tool, podcasting, and investigating its pedagogical feasibility for increasing student participation and interaction.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Communication Apprehension and Language Learning

Communication apprehension (CA) can affect learning experiences in different ways. McCroskey (1977) defined CA as “an anxiety syndrome associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons” (p. 28). Oral communication apprehension, the most common type of CA, affects at least 15 to 20% of students (McCroskey, 1977) and can have negative effects on learners. Some evidence suggests that CA does not impact academic performance (Olaniran & Stewart, 1996) and that voice pedagogy training can lower CA (Tedesco & Patterson, 2015), although longitudinal data indicates that high CA students are at risk of dropping out of school even though their grades do not differ significantly from those with low CA (Ericson & Gardner, 1992). While students with low levels of achievement might be assumed to experience high CA, honors students have reported higher levels of CA than non-honors students (Butler, Pryor, & Marti, 2004).

Since language learning necessarily involves oral participation, it is reasonable to expect that some students will experience CA in such courses. Specifically, CA plays a critical role in students’ second language acquisition (Rahmatollahi & Khalili, 2015). Literature suggests that language instructors must address students’ CA in order to facilitate second language acquisition (McCroskey, Fayer& Richmond, 1985). Students who experience CA in their native language also experience CA in their second language (Jung & McCroskey, 2004), and students’ level of CA in their first language establishes a baseline for their level of CA in a second language (McCroskey, Gudykunst, & Nishida, 1985). CA levels tend to be higher in one’s second language than in one’s native tongue (Richmond, McCroskey, McCroskey, & Fayer, 2008), although some evidence to the contrary exists in particular circumstances (Rimkeerakul, 2015). Additionally, cross-cultural research indicates that older individuals exhibit higher levels of CA than younger individuals (Watson, Monroe, & Atterstrom, 1989).
Conclusion and Recommendation for Future Enhancement of ICT Adoption in Public Sector


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