Chapter 3

Going beyond Audio: Adding Multimedia to Podcasts for Foreign Language Education

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ABSTRACT

Podcasting presents exciting new opportunities for delivering pedagogical content, but, for effective learning, teaching second languages and their associated cultural aspects often demands the use of textual and visual components. The flexible nature of distributing information via RSS feeds allows for a variety of approaches to delivering multimedia content. This chapter begins with a discussion of some important questions that must be asked at the planning stages of any multimedia podcasting project, followed by several strategies for incorporating multimedia content into podcasts, including situations where each strategy might be appropriate and some of the pros and cons of each approach. Also discussed are some issues related to copyright, and some ways that educators can legally obtain free content to use in their podcasts. The chapter closes with a look at some unanswered questions related to the use of multimedia content in second language education.

INTRODUCTION

When Apple released the first line of iPods® in 2001, the devices represented, for most users, a way to conveniently store their libraries of music and audio books. The first iPods capable of displaying video were not introduced until 2005, and the interim four years created a strong association between iPods and audio content delivery. Currently, however, video display technology is available across most of the iPod product line, and multimedia podcasts can also be viewed, not only on other media players such as Microsoft’s Zune® and Sony’s Walkman®, but also on a variety of other popular devices such as the Sony PlayStation Portable® and high-end cellular phones. With the 2010 release of the Apple iPad® and similar tablet devices from a number of other companies, the trend towards multimedia consumption in portable formats seems likely to accelerate over the coming...
years. Not only is compatible playback hardware now more widespread, but so is access to broadband delivery—not only via wireless networks in homes and on campuses, but increasingly through 3G and 4G cellular networks—making it much easier for students to download the large files that multimedia content requires. Furthermore, the cost per megabyte of hard drives and solid state storage media has continued to plummet, making it easier for broadcasters and users to serve and store those files.

Things have become easier, not only for multimedia podcast consumers, but also for content creators. Many new computers now come with built-in microphones, video cameras, and multimedia development software, making them ready for basic content development “out of the box.” For more advanced projects, sound and video editing software that would have cost thousands of dollars just a decade ago can now be had for hundreds (or less).

Now that many of the barriers related to creating and using multimedia podcasts are disappearing, podcasts are rapidly becoming the learning content vehicle of choice for many language educators. The value added by incorporating multimedia content into pedagogical materials is clear. From the learner’s perspective, an audio-only podcast could be compared to a class taught in the dark. Adding visual elements to your podcast turns on the lights.

Use of multimedia is not a “silver bullet,” however, and as is the case when designing any form of pedagogical device, a clear understanding of your goals for instruction, as well as an awareness of the strengths and weaknesses of this new media, is vital. In this chapter, I will examine some of the benefits of incorporating multimedia elements into your podcast, consider some of the drawbacks of using multimedia, and share some techniques for maximizing your use of multimedia for podcasting in second language education. I will also discuss considerations important when planning your multimedia podcast, including target population, time and financial costs, and technical issues. After reading this chapter, I hope that you will have some concrete ideas about what kind of multimedia podcasting project will best fit the needs of both your students and your skill and resource base. I hope to offer a starting point for you, as you begin to develop your multimedia podcasting project. I also hope to offer you a basic understanding of some important issues related to copyright as applied to developing multimedia podcasts, and some sources for legally obtaining third party content that you can use for development.

BACKGROUND

Multimedia has long been used in second language education, with its history going as far back as the 1960s (Jung, 1997). Its effectiveness has also been demonstrated, leading to the development of listening skills and speaking skills, as well to an improved understanding of cultural contexts, while at the same time increasing learner motivation and decreasing anxiety (White, Easton, & Anderson, 2000). Multimedia can be also be used in language education as a method for addressing cognitive styles and for aiding in cognitive organization of pedagogical content (Toma, 2000).

Despite its relatively short history, the effectiveness of podcasting in higher education is well documented. Fernandez, Simo, and Sallan (2009), for example, showed that students found podcasting to be an excellent supplement to traditional course resources, and showed that the incorporation of podcasts into higher education courses increased students’ feelings of contact with teachers and increased student motivation. Multimedia podcasts were found to be particularly effective, as the inclusion of multimedia content is a method of addressing multiple learning styles.
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