Chapter 4

Getting Started:
Academic Podcasting made Simple

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ABSTRACT

Podcasting is an excellent way to engage students and to supplement the instructional materials used in face-to-face and online courses and in Mobile-Assisted Language Learning programs. A well-produced weekly podcast can enhance course content, learning activities, and student-teacher interactions, while enabling students to take their learning materials with them wherever they go, thus reinforcing and supporting language acquisition. While there are many resources that delineate how to create a podcast, few address the instructional, technological, and production factors that must be considered for the effective use of podcasting in instruction. This chapter includes a brief review of the literature that addresses the use of podcasts in language learning programs, and offers a simple guide for creating your first podcast, lessons learned, and the results of a student survey on the use of podcasts.

INTRODUCTION

During his 45-minute commute to work, Marcos is listening to a weekly podcast used in his upper-level course in technology education and corporate training. As a second-language learner, he appreciates the convenience and instructional support that the podcast offers. Although Marcos has mastered conversational English, he still struggles with his academic language skills. Using podcasts, his professor reviews key terms and concepts, and offers examples of their real-life applications. For several days, Marcos has been struggling to understand an upcoming project’s requirements, but the podcast clarifies the assignment and sparks an idea for the training module that he needs to develop. He is excited because it is actually a project he can employ in his new position as technology trainer at the local hospital. He knows exactly what he’s going to do!

During the spring of 2009, Marcos was enrolled in an upper-level, fully online class in

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-60960-141-6.ch004
which a weekly podcast was produced. The online course was offered as part of an innovative program designed to seamlessly transfer students with technical associate degrees into a bachelor’s degree program. The podcasts were developed to engage students in critical reflection and to provide examples and authentic applications of the weekly topics and underlying concepts addressed in class. Since the instructor’s class was over 90% Hispanic, with more than half of the students being second language learners, the podcasts had the added benefit of assisting those students to better comprehend the reading materials.

Marcos, and other students for whom English is not their primary language, can benefit from the use of podcasts. Podcasts can help second-language learners transfer concepts from academic isolation to socially and professionally meaningful contexts (Lee & Chan, 2007; Thorne & Scott Payne, 2005). After listening to the weekly topics discussed and expanded upon by the professor, Marcos is reassured that he now fully understands the readings. Students can listen to the podcasts as often as necessary and at their convenience, even on the commute to work, thereby allowing them to take advantage of normally unproductive time. Through podcasts, instructors can provide a valuable Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL) resource for their second language learners, while enhancing the curriculum for all students.

This chapter provides an overview of the use of podcasts to enhance language learning, a guide to creating your first podcast, the results of a student survey, lessons learned during the first-year podcasting experience, and future directions.

BACKGROUND

A podcast is a digital audio file which is created to be easily published on the Internet and downloaded to a computer or mobile device, such as an MP3 player, iPod®, or cell phone. According to eMarketer (2009), the emergence of social networking and mobile technologies has set the stage for the exponential growth in the use and popularity of podcasting. “eMarketer projects that growth will continue at least through 2013, when there will be 37.6 million people downloading podcasts on a monthly basis, more than double the 2008 figure of 17.4 million” (para. 5). Currently, podcasting has replaced cassette recordings, and soon it may even replace compact discs. As an increasingly “popular, traditional media” (eMarketer, para. 9), podcasts are quickly becoming the preferred audio resource for business people, educators, and students, especially for mobile-assisted language learning (MALL).

Although podcasts are a recent phenomenon, the uses and benefits of audio for language acquisition are well established. Edirisingha, Rizzi, and Rothwell (2007, p. 89) cited research that dates back to 1984, when Durbridge noted that “learners respond to sound,” such as “understanding spoken language, analysing music, listening in on conversations, being ‘talked through’ tasks… hearing facts, discussions and opinions from experts in their field;” and “being encouraged by the voice of somebody they know and respect.” The integration of audio also helps learners work through course content and develop pronunciation skills by affording them the opportunity to listen to the recorded resources as often as necessary and at their convenience.

In particular, podcasts’ current popularity elucidates the added benefits that they offer which are an improvement over those of former audio resources. They are, for example, easy to create, publish, and access (Rosell-Aguilar, 2007; Raetham & Zhang, 2006; Schlosser & Burmeister, 2006). Unlike tape cassettes or CDs, William and McMinn (2008), noted that “student produced podcasts have the potential for a world-wide audience, giving students purpose and motivation to create a better product” (p. 212). Although language learners may not speak the target language, more and more do speak the language of technology. They are adept