Chapter 7
Simulating Immersion: Podcasting in Spanish Teaching

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ABSTRACT
This chapter describes the genesis, implementation, and evaluation of an innovative approach to the intensive use of Academic Podcasting Technology (APT) in the teaching of Spanish to undergraduates at the Australian National University from 2007 to 2009. Students became active users and producers of Spanish language podcasts in a simulated immersion environment. Integrating APT into the educational design of two thematic courses created authentic and engaging socio-cultural contexts for language use while meeting students’ needs for resource accessibility and mobility. Pioneering and exciting in its conception and outcomes, this approach has received very positive feedback from students, and provides a pedagogically-sound model for the effective use of APT in immersive-style language teaching.

INTRODUCTION
A question of significant relevance to language lecturers is how to provide students with a comprehensively immersive experience within the context of a typical campus-bound program. In the Spanish program at The Australian National University (ANU), our answer has been to engage students using the opportunities offered by Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL), and specifically using academic podcasting technology (APT), in ways that have allowed the construction of contemporaneous real and virtual immersive language experiences for our students. This chapter describes the genesis and rationale of our approach to creating a simulated immersion experience in a specific course delivered annually from 2006 to 2009. In reporting on the ways in which we used action research to monitor and evaluate the
Simulating Immersion teaching and learning outcomes from year to year, we show the importance of being responsive to feedback (the latter illustrated in this chapter by italicized quotes from our students) and of being committed to an improvement cycle. We also describe our findings in relation to a longitudinal view of the outcomes of APT integration, and show the benefits of using APT to simulate an immersive language environment.

Using CALL and MALL in Teaching Spanish

Despite the well-recognized potential for Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL), it is rare for the findings of sophisticated language-related research to be applied to the development of software. In the context of Spanish, for example, this appears to be because of a lack of necessary specialist intellectual resources; the high cost for both publishers and consumers of “technologically sophisticated and culturally authentic language learning programs”; and the inability of educational institutions to provide the necessary high-end hardware or to meet expensive licensing costs (e.g. Lafford, Lafford, & Sykes, 2007).

With these kinds of inhibitions slowing the development of the highest-quality CALL, it is not surprising that many authors are acknowledging MALL technologies, especially MP3 devices and APT, as the most exciting recent advances in language teaching (e.g. Godwin-Jones, 2005; Lafford & Lafford, 2005; Murphy, 2008; Abdous, Camarena & Facer, 2009; this volume). Its portability and accessibility opportunities alone make podcasting technology very attractive to language teachers. This has been even more true since Apple’s 2005 release of the iTunes® software, which enables easy subscription to Really Simple Syndication (RSS) feeds.

However, Thomas (2008) reports that this technology appears often to be used simply to enhance the digital accessibility of material previously available in language labs, without any specific purpose or new educational objective. Even where podcasts are integrated into course content, this often occurs as one-way communication from the teacher: student production of podcasts is generally found only in technology-focused courses, such as new media and education (Lee & Chan, 2007; Lazzari, 2009). Potentially more expressive uses of APT are certainly being reported, especially in English as a Second Language teaching. There are examples of such use in language teaching in the United States of America (Gilgen, 2005; Cain, 2007) and in the United Kingdom (Jobbings, 2005), but in general it seems that APT remains underutilized (Thorne & Payne, 2005; Lazzari, 2009).

In Australia, the adoption of APT has been quite slow. Although there have been several positive and enthusiastic assessments of the potential of podcasting for language learning (e.g. Laing, Wootton, & Irons, 2006; Australian Learning and Teaching Council, 2009), there appear to be few examples of hands-on implementation. In late 2006, at the time this project was being designed, an extensive review of Australian-focused journals found no reports of university language courses in which course materials were composed exclusively of audio materials, or in which podcast production was integrated into educational design. As we were moving into very new territory, therefore, we recognized that there would be a significant amount of trial and error involved in introducing APT into ANU’s Spanish program, and that we would have to incorporate evaluation accordingly.

TEACHING SPANISH AT THE ANU

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