Podcasts: Teacher and Student Friendly Technology in Language Teaching and Learning

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Abstract
Technology is an increasing part of the social and academic lives of our students in recent years. Podcast and podcasting is a modern digital technology that can be used effectively for language teaching and learning purposes. A podcast is a series of audio or video files on web which can be freely downloaded to a computer. The effective ways of using this new technology within and out of the classroom should be examined in order to enhance the learning and teaching process. Regarding the potential linguistic and learning benefits of podcasts, it is believed this new technology can have a positive impact on language learners. The techniques and the difficulties of adopting and adapting podcasts into language teaching and learning will be the focus of this paper.

Keywords: Technology, Podcasts, Language Teaching and Learning.

INTRODUCTION

The use of podcasts is becoming more and more popular by ELT and EFT teachers and students, mainly because anyone with a computer and Internet connection can download, and in some cases create their own podcast easily. This is the reason why there are currently tens of thousands of podcasts available on the web covering a wide range of subject areas (Thomas, 2006). Piotr Tryhubczak as an English language teacher in Poland who has used this technology in his classes for discovering a whole new world. This is indeed a brand new world of digital media which is free of charge and instantly available to students and teachers thanks to the Internet (Tryhubczak, 2009). English language teachers can use podcasts in their classes because they are mainly recorded in English and there are myriads of topics being discussed. This means that there are already podcasts that will suit the varying tastes of individual learners across the EFL spectrum (Flanagan & Calandra, 2005). These supplementary classroom materials can enhance student’s motivation and help them become more independent, responsible, and confident language learners.

This study examines the effective ways of using this new technology within and out of the classroom in order to enhance the learning and teaching process. Regarding the potential linguistic and learning benefits of podcasts, it is believed that this new technology can have a positive impact on language learners. The techniques and the difficulties of adopting and adapting podcasts into language teaching and learning will be the focus of this paper.

WHAT IS A PODCAST AND PODCASTING?

Podcast and podcasting is a modern digital technology that can be used effectively for language teaching and learning purposes. The term podcast is a combination of two words: the name of popular MP3 player iPod and the word broadcast. Podcasts are audio or video files on the web which can be freely downloaded to a computer and can be listened to on a computer or any portable playback device that supports MP3 files (Jordan, 2007). When a podcast stored in a portable MP3
player, it can be listened easily whenever and wherever the listener wants, “so that it can be listened to at the user’s convenience” (Jordan, 2007). In fact, the existence of audio content on the Internet is not new. Thus, both streaming and downloadable audio files have been around for a number of years. What differentiates podcasting from previous forms of audio access is “the ease of publication, ease of subscription, and ease of use across multiple environments” (Campbell, 2005). The main advantages of podcasts is the “ability to be syndicated, subscribed to, and downloaded automatically when new content is added”, Jordan (2007).

Villano (2008) calls podcasting a “digital file-sharing activity”. RSS (Really Simple Syndication) feeds technology is a main medium that makes this whole process possible. Users by using RSS can automatically subscribe to preferred file and download it to their iTunes or download on their computers or mobile devices. They can then use conveniently whenever or wherever they want. An aggregator or a podcatcher is software that allows for such an operations. iTunes is the most popular podcatcher that can be used to download these file and can be freely downloaded from apple’s website (Villano, 2008). Jordan (2007) lists three kinds of podcasts: audio, enhanced, and video podcasts. Audio podcasts are mainly available in MP3 format and are the most common among the three types. Enhanced podcasts include images in addition to audio; and finally, video podcasts are typically movies that can be easily downloaded.

PODCASTS AS SUPPLEMENTARY RESOURCE IN THE LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

Some educators believe that podcasting would revolutionize learning, (Campbell, 2005). Teachers and learners are incorporating podcasts as supplementary materials to engage learners, enhance class instruction and go beyond the textbooks, (Flanagan & Calandra, 2005). Teachers can add new dimensions to teaching and learning process by making both in-house and existing podcasts available to students. The effective ways of using podcasts within and out of the classroom can enhance the learning and teaching process. Regarding the potential linguistic and learning benefits of podcasts, it is believed that this new technology can have a positive impact on language learners.

The adopting and adapting podcasts into language teaching and learning are two main stages that teachers should be aware of. During the adoption stage, the podcast is selected from a non-educational context and appropriated to education. In adaptation process the selected podcasts are appropriated and modified to be taught the four main skills in language learning. As Graham Stanley highlights at its most basic level, podcasts offer language teachers and students a wide range of possibilities for extra listening both inside and outside of the classroom. Supplementing the (often) scripted and stilted textbook listening with the real life authentic conversations you can find on many podcasts is an attractive option for language teachers (not to mention their students)”, (Stanley, 2006).

These podcasts often come with transcripts to support language learners. Andrzej Zychla (2007) states that insufficient language exposure, students’ overdependence on teachers, and differences in facilities among schools are some of the general problems in language education that podcasting can help alleviate by bringing some solutions:

students spend additional hours working actively preparing their podcasts; creating their own podcasts and active search for needed information and new topics make students more independent and, consequently, more involved in the learning process as well as interested in their own progress; these problems can be overcome as all that is needed to create and share podcasts is basic recording equipment (commonly found in portable audio devices or even mobile phones), a computer (or computers) with Internet access; all of which have become relatively widespread recently, regardless location. (Zychla, 2007)
Patten and Craig point out that the use of podcasts “empower ELLs to take control over the direction of their learning, manage the speed of their learning, maintain their own pace, and develop their own identity as English speakers, they are more easily integrated into academic and social worlds” (Patten & Craig 2007). Since language is ideally learned through frequent exposure, podcasts are a natural and essential addition to language classes (Flanagan & Calandra, 2005). Teachers can offer students majoring in English Language Teaching to download and listen to news stories and transcribe the content.

**TYPES OF MATERIALS FOR LANGUAGE TEACHERS AND LEARNERS**

English language teachers mainly use two types of podcasts in their classroom: those that are created for the purpose of teaching languages, and mainly are simplified language and may include transcripts, and those that are simply recorded in the target language by teachers themselves or their students. Selingo (2006) states that the first category are especially created for language learners, they are usually easier to listen to and are sometimes even graded to suit learners at varying proficiency levels, “as a result, teachers already using podcasts in their classes tend to be early adopters of technology”, (Selingo, 2006). The second type of podcasts is usually not recorded for the purpose of educating learners but is authentic in that they exist for the purpose of transmitting information and the language is not simplified. Frequent exposure to this type of podcasts helps language learners to improve their productive and receptive language skills.

Teachers by assigning their student to these types of podcasts as extensive listening assignments can help them to develop their productive and receptive language skills. They can assign students to many different kinds of activities such as transcription, summary writing, listening for details, note-taking, and providing an opinion regarding the topic. Piotr Tryhubczak explains how using podcast can be helpful:

Actually, podcasts may be used in all the same ways you use audio or video material. You may ask your student(s) to repeat whole sentences from the podcast or just listen for the gist. If you want, ask the learners specific comprehension questions. Your students may also finish sentences off, copy intonation, reconstruct questions (if you mute them and then the students hear the answer only) or answer the questions in a dialogue which has already been played. I am personally keen on gapfilling exercises and using podcasts as a warm-up and a springboard for a class discussion. If you pause a podcast in the middle, you might want the listeners to predict how the story is going to develop. Additionally, podcasts provide genuinely interesting information, which makes language work more motivating and enjoyable. The authenticity of the material is an obvious additional bonus here! (Tryhubczak, 2009).

What teachers could do is to direct students how to access podcasts and assist them in finding what they are interested in. The two main way is showing their students some websites that group and categorize podcasts: (http://www.podcastingnews.com/forum) or (http://www.podcastdirectory.org), and (http://www.allpodcasts.com). Teachers, as the next step, can teach their students how to download the podcasts related to their level and field of study. The process is actually very undemanding. In the case of directories, podcasts can usually be downloaded by the episode. Students can automatically download every single episode published by the podcaster with the help of an aggregator. Learners can also be directed to platforms such as iTunes (http://www.apple.com/itunes/), as a podcast directory and an aggregator or podcatcher, which allows listeners to automatically subscribe to new content of their choice. Finally, the downloaded files, usually in MP3 format, can then be listened to on a computer or on portable audio playback devices that support MP3 files (Godwin-Jones, 2005).

Incorporating web-based resources as supplementary and complementary resources in the language classroom, especially for ELT freshmen students, will help them to get acquaintance with the
authentic materials. Assigning students to downloading audio or video file activities from VOA Special English podcast (http://www.voanews.com), and the Daily Idiom (http://www.englishcaster.com/idioms/) and requiring them to prepare for partial transcription, listening for the main idea, listening for details, note-taking, and summary writing will help them to improve their productive and receptive skills. Jeff McQuillan highlights that The VOA Special English program presents daily news and in-depth feature stories written with a controlled set of vocabulary (1500 words) using short clear sentences written in the active voice and a limited number of idioms. The audio podcasts are read at approximately two-thirds of native rate to increase comprehension. While no explanation or review of the stories is provided, a full text of each story can be found on the website for individual or classroom use. The stories are by definition topical and many are likely to interest secondary students. The use of the controlled vocabulary helps ensure comprehensibility while giving authentic news content to students (McQuillan, 2006).

Therefore, the VOA Special English program offers students the chance to improve their receptive and productive skills and also help them understand not just about the language but also about the culture.

HELPING STUDENTS TO CREATE THEIR OWN PODCASTS

Creating podcasts by students is a challenging task for them, but they learn a lot when they do it. Some English Language Teachers may include podcast creation as part of the activities in the language classroom. Both teacher and student created podcasts can supplement teacher-centered instruction. Other uses for podcasting include recording lessons for students who are absent because of a long illness and recording important school events to serve as archives (Selingo, 2006; Villano, 2008).

Students enjoy doing these activities if they are given a project to complete. Creating podcasts on any topic allows them to address a real audience which will encourage them to create something meaningful. Recording a podcast and publishing it motivates them to know that they have the whole world as their audience and that their work is not just something their teacher can put a grade on (Selingo, 2006). Moreover, involving them to create a material in the target language would help them become more proficient in the use of that language. Regarding the linguistic benefits of creating podcasts Brewster & Dietze (2008) maintain that

As podcasts are primarily audio shows, the students involved in making them must concentrate on pronunciation and intonation when recording interviews or the other sections in the studio. Since they will be able to playback and listen to their recordings and edit them or re-record them, the project should provide ample focused practice on pronunciation. (Brewster & Dietze, 2008)

Assigning students to create podcasts can enhance learning opportunities and help them to do extra research and mastering the content area in the process. These kinds of activities mainly require students to work in groups which help them to make communication among them. In addition, through group activities students will learn, among other things, to deliver their ideas in an efficient and forceful manner. Lastly, these activities can help students to take charge of their own learning and connect them to the real-world contexts. (Villano, 2008). According to Villano while anyone can podcast, creating podcasts with true academic value can be tough. How can [] educators make the content unique, and relevant to teaching and learning? Technology coordinators from districts all over the country say there are nuances to making worthwhile podcasts, and simple tools that can empower teachers to turn run-of-the-mill podcasts into compelling educational exercises. (Villano, 2008)
Villano recommends five points to be taken into consideration by teachers and students: a) Teacher and students should be prepared; content-wise, podcasting is a lot like speechwriting. For both activities, students (and instructors) need to know their audience, pick a theme, and do extensive research on their chosen topic. B) They should focus on sounds; because podcasts are nothing more than large sound files, it is critical to filter background noise and even out volume to make the podcast interesting or at least bearable, to listen to. c) They should edit wisely; when recording with students, keep disruptions to a minimum so as to force them to stay on task. d) They should be consistent; to attract audiences, podcasters should regularly come up with new content to keep listeners coming back for more. For educators aiming to include podcasting activities for students, this activity should be integrated into the classroom routine. e) They should Follow the leaders; The best way for podcasters to improve their own podcasts is by studying successful examples. By listening to successful podcasts that are designed for a similar audience or covers similar topics, potential podcasters can learn what elements contribute to their attractiveness” (Villano, 2008).

CONCLUSION

Podcasting as a teacher and student friendly technology in language teaching and learning can be used easily at any time and conveniently anywhere. Nowadays, a considerable percentage of the population is in possession of laptops, MP3 players, iPods, and cell phones. Moreover, “today's generation of teenagers and young adults have already embraced this technology and as more and more material is becoming available, so too is its popularity advancing. In the field of education, teachers have experimented, with many reporting great success, in engaging students and providing student-centered, motivating course content” (Brewster & Dietze, 2008). Using podcasts in EFL context meets the need for oral activities that are often neglected in the EFL settings. Thus, they could potentially make up for learners' lack of exposure to the target language. Podcasts offer great pedagogical potentials for students and promotes effective and deep learning according to currently accepted cognitive theories. Familiarizing students with podcasts also can contribute to promoting life-long learning that engages students in motivating authentic experiences with the whole world. EFL learners can potentially overcome the disadvantage of not having an English milieu by accessing authentic target-language materials in the form of podcasts.

REFERENCES


