Podcasting and Language Learning

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INTRODUCTION

The second generation of Web known as Web 2.0 has opened up new possibilities of interactive publishing, networking, and collaborating (Warschauer & Grimes, 2007) through its unique tools such as blogging, wikis, social network sites, and podcasting. From among Web 2.0 technological tools, podcasting has exclusive pedagogical benefits as it promotes mobile learning and "allow[s] learners to vary their study location and to study on the move" (Evans, 2008, p. 492). Further, podcasts have enormous potential to reduce students' learning anxiety (Chan & Lee, 2005), enhance learning outcome (Cebeci & Tekdal, 2006) and increase engagement in class activities (Edirisingha & Salmon, 2007).

Podcasts have been found to be very useful in language classes because in addition to their general educational values, they contribute substantially to the development of language competence especially listening skill (Lee, 2007). In spite of the widespread use of podcasts for educational purposes, podcasts and their potential for language classes are still unknown to many language teachers especially in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) setting. It is a common fallacy among many teachers that producing and publishing e-content is not an easy task and many doubt if the payoff is worth the effort. Research shows when end-users of technology (e.g., students and teachers) become familiar with technological tools and applications, their negative attitude lowers and they show more willingness to take advantage of technology and its educational benefits (Rahimi & Yadollahi, 2011).

The aim of the present article is thus threefold. First, the podcast technology is defined and its educational value is discussed. Second, the role of podcasting in language education and different types of podcasts will be described; and simple guidelines will be provided to help readers understand how podcasts are made. Finally, the research direction of using podcasting in language teaching/learning will be addressed.

BACKGROUND

Web 2.0 marks a significant shift from read-only applications of Web 1.0 to content sharing 'social software' that enables communication, collaboration, and interaction among Internet users. Web 2.0 is "a platform for simple, lightweight services that leverage social interactions for communication, collaboration, and creating, remixing and sharing content" (Becta, 2008). Students use Web 2.0 to create and recreate the content with a do-it-yourself and open source approach (Lorenzo, Oblinger, & Dziuban, 2007). They often take the existing material, change it with their own words (by adding or deleting), and then republish it. The activities associated with Web 2.0 realize four human dispositions including (Crook, 2008, pp. 7-8)

- **Socializing the Playful:** Games and virtual worlds;
- **Socializing the Expressive:** Media design, sharing, and publication;
- **Socializing the Reflective:** Blogs, social networks, and wikis; and
- **Socializing the Exploratory:** Syndication, recommenders, and folksonomies.

There are strong links between Web 2.0 and socio-cultural theories of learning (Selwyn, 2008) which emphasize the dynamic nature of the interplay between teachers, learners, tasks, and contexts (Williams & Burden, 1997). In this framework we see "active and authentic learning taking place best where knowledge can be constructed actively by learners who are supported in communal social settings" (Selwyn, 2008, p. 10).

Web 2.0 supports the learning concepts of collaboration, publication, literacies, and inquiry (Crook, 2008). There are many Internet applications which embody these Web 2.0 qualities including social

networking, wikis, blogs, and podcasting. Students' everyday engagement with these applications has called for the integration of Web 2.0 in education. It is suggested that using Web 2.0 in education promotes informal and lifelong learning (Dohn, 2009), facilitates and enhances student learning (Bennet, et al., 2012), and creates positive attitudes towards learning among students (Rahimi & Miri, 2014).

Language teachers use Web 2.0 applications for teaching and practicing a variety of materials. While wiki and blogging are mostly used for teaching and practicing written language skills (e.g., Li, 2011; Rahimi & Miri, 2014), podcasting has been used to improve oral language skills (e.g., O'Bryan & Hegelheimer, 2007; Ducate, & Lomicka, 2009). Podcasting is widely used in language classes due to its convenient, portable and easy to use format; attractiveness, low cost; and capability to personalize learning with different types of activity (Rosell-Aguilar, 2013).

The Definition of Podcasting

Podcasts are audio files commonly in mp3 format that can be played by a number of portable media players such as laptops, tablets, and cellphones (Rahimi & Katal, 2012). Podcasts are first made with media player software and then are uploaded to available podcast hosting services on the Internet by the author. Podcasts combine "the benefits of the broadcast nature of radio with the flexibility, learner control and personalization afforded by recorded audio" (Chan & Lee, 2005, p. 64-65).

Anyone who is interested in the podcast can download it on his/her media player device or desktop computer to be listened to at a convenient time and place. Podcasts can also be automatically downloaded using the RSS feed (Really Simple Syndication). This means that the users can subscribe to a podcast hosting service and then every time there is an update or new content, it will be downloaded on the users' devices automatically. RSS saves the time of the users, as there is no need for them to monitor the websites for updates (Evans, 2008). Podcast has three key characteristics (Lee, Miller, & Newnham, 2009, p. 53):

- It uses *file-based downloads*. As opposed to streaming, which by definition means playing the media as it downloads, podcast files are downloaded entirely before they are consumed;

- It is *subscription-based*. The user pre-selects one or more feeds or channels of his/her choice and podcasts are automatically "pushed" to his/her computer on a regular schedule;
- The content is consumed on *portable devices*, such as dedicated MP3 players (including but not limited to iPods), mobile phones, as well as personal digital assistants (PDAs) that have MP3 playback capabilities.

Podcasts have experienced growing recognition and use by Internet users due to the pervasiveness of the Internet, the fast growth of broadband, the creation and availability of multimedia personal computers, the blurring of streaming and downloading media, and the rapid adoption of portable MP3 playback devices (Campbell, 2005).

Educational Value of Podcasts

Podcasts are generally used in higher education to provide students with information on administrative issues (*administrative podcasts*), special lectures and seminars (*special lecture series podcasts*), course lectures (the traditional classroom *lecture podcasts*, also called *substitutional podcasts*, if they substitute classroom lectures) (Vogele & Gard, 2006), or additional materials for classroom teachings (*supplementary podcasts*). Students can also make their own materials to be shared by other students (*student generated* or *creative podcasts*) (Heilesen, 2010). Podcasting helps to disseminate course content, capture live classroom material, and enhance studying (Donnelly & Berge, 2006). Some uses of podcasting in education include (Sloan, 2005, slide 12)

- For distance learning
- To facilitate self-paced learning
- For remediation of slower learners
- To allow faculty to offer advanced and/or highly motivated learners extra content
- For helping students with reading and/or other learning disabilities
- For multi-lingual education
- To provide the ability for educators to feature guest speakers from remote locations

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