

Chapter XXI

The Impact of Podcasting on Students Learning Outcomes

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ABSTRACT

As part of an initiative to enhance the humanities' use of emerging technologies, the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures at Old Dominion University is currently developing strategies for incorporating the use of podcasting—disseminating audio programming over the Internet—in its foreign language curricula and is studying podcasting's effects on foreign language teaching and learning. The academic use of podcasting allows for 24/7 accessibility and portability of the teaching and learning experience, while enabling on-demand learner control and personalization (Lee & Chan, 2007). It permits the restructuring of valuable classroom time and can convert the popular iPod and other MP3 players into multipurpose teaching and learning tools that can be used to reinforce class content, to improve pronunciation and vocabulary, and to improve oral and aural skills. The early results of this pilot project suggest that podcasting has positive effects on students' learning outcomes and study habits.

INTRODUCTION

“Communication is at the heart of second language study,” according to the National Standards for Foreign Language Education (1999). It is the most important and widely used skill for language learners developed as part of the well-known five-Cs of foreign language education: Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities. While the five goal areas make up the “weave of curricular elements” (National Standards for Foreign Language Education, 2006), it is ultimately communicative competence that is the key. Moreover, “it is the acquisition of the ability to communicate in meaningful and appropriate ways with users of other languages that is the ultimate goal of today’s foreign language classroom” (National Standards, 1999). In this regard, the communicative modes (Interpersonal, Interpretive, and Presentational) outlined by the National Standards play a significant and critical role in achieving oral proficiency. Feyten (1991) examined the relationship between listening and language acquisition. The results of her 1991 study confirm what others, like Dunkel (1986), have found, that “the key to achieving proficiency in speaking is developing proficiency in listening comprehension.” In this regard, Berne (1995) found that additional exposure to listening activities improves comprehension. Similarly, Chang and Read (2006) concluded that the repetition of the input as a listening support for foreign language test takers has a significant interaction effect on learners’ levels of listening proficiency. These results are consistent with the findings of Trofimovich and Gathbonton (2006), which show that repetition and focus on form have measurable benefits for processing second language speech; Smidt & Hegelheimer’s (2005) recent study found that using authentic Web-delivered video enhances the incidental acquisition of vocabulary as well as listening comprehension.

However, diversifying and creating opportunities for comprehensive listening can be a daunt-

ing task for learners and instructors, given the limited amount of class time available for activities that promote oral and aural skills. Consequently, exposure to authentic language through the use of ancillary materials and resources outside of class, such as language-specific software, digital online audio and video provided by textbook publishers, and television programming such as Satellite Communications for Learning (SCOLA) from around the world is critical to building oral and aural skills. Resources such as these are vital to language development programs, provided they are appropriately integrated into language courses for optimal use. Today’s students, members of the “net generation” or “digital natives” (Prensky, 2001), are at ease with the latest technology and communicate primarily through the use of cell phones, instant messaging (IM), wikis, blogs, MySpace, YouTube, podcasting, and iPods. Walk across any university campus today and you will find students using iPods to listen to their favorite songs on their way to class. What if, instead of listening to music, they could listen to Italian music, French vocabulary, or Spanish grammar? Podcasting could become an academic tool and “another avenue for providing language learners with access to diverse authentic materials ...” (Thorne & Payne, 2005).

Recent use of technology in language learning environments has followed the path of the hardware innovations that have evolved from the early use of analog devices such as cassette tape players to the plethora of new digital devices such as MP3 players, iPods, and computer-assisted language learning (CALL) environments. In this vein, podcasting is the logical progression from the self-contained oral/aural language tasks practiced in language learning labs to the on-demand and more collaborative learning activities that are available 24/7. As an audio/video content delivery approach based on Web syndication protocols (RSS and/or Atom), podcasting is reshaping the landscape of information/content delivery by targeting a myriad of mobile and wireless de-

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