

PODCASTING: A VIEW FROM THE TRENCHES

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1. Introduction

Podcasting as an educational activity is often associated with E-learning 2.0, a term coined in 2005 by Stephen Downes in a landmark article of the same name (Downes, 2005). It is one of a number of activities - in addition to using blogs, wikis, and other content-sharing applications - which focus on the social sharing of ideas. In the case of podcating, this is achieved through the easy production and distribution of audio files. Podcasting, with digital audio files and MP3 players, is relatively new; however, the practice of facilitating listening training by providing learners with recorded audio content goes back at least to the 1960s. What is exciting about this new trend is that podcasting can do much more than just provide learners with audio content - though it can do that very efficiently. It also allows for collaborative activities where content is largely created by the users themselves and collected together by tools that allow it to be shared easily.

These new possibilities for sharing have the power to change the nature of language classes. Language instructors no doubt instinctively find these activities attractive as the philosophy of the approach fits in nicely with the currently accepted language teaching pedagogy. A brief look at Kumaravadivelu's (1994) list of best practice macrostrategies confirms that the activities of

this type of learning seem to match many of the practices on the list of what all modern language teachers should be doing in his view:

- 1). Maximizing learning opportunities
- 2). Facilitating negotiated interaction
- 3). Minimizing perceptual mismatches
- 4). Activating intuitive heuristics
- 5). Fostering language awareness
- 6). Contextualizing linguistic input
- 7). Integrating language skills
- 8). Promoting learner autonomy
- 9). Raising cultural consciousness
- 10). Ensuring social relevance

Podcasting in particular seems promising as a tool for maximizing learning opportunities and promoting learner autonomy because the audio files are relatively easy to make and deliver and because the players are so portable. Furthermore, creating project opportunities based on podcasting seems to be ideal for facilitating many if not all the other items on Kumaravadivelu's list. In addition, podcasting's emphasis on spoken language that can be both meaningful and accessible to students, seems to have the potential to help fill a need for such input (and output possibilities) in many learning settings where teachers have long felt that written text has been too dominant. In fact, any E-learning 2.0 activity with a focus on creating communities of users where participants are learning actively and independently and producing ideas and communicating actively, as well as sharing and helping each other, offers a promising social climate for language learning, something that is increasingly seen as

important (Block, 2003; Firth and Wagner, 1998; Ohta, 2001; Zuengler & Miller, 2006). These activities also provide opportunities for learners to form positive identities of themselves as active members of English-using communities, something that has the power to increase learner motivation (Lam, 2000; Morita, 2004; Peirce, 1995; Toohey, 1998).

In the spring and fall of 2006, enamored with new E-learning 2.0 approaches, I made use of podcasts with three speaking classes of intermediate-level students at a junior college in Yokohama. One class participated in a class radio show where students took turns designing and hosting a show; and two classes used podcasts as a way to prepare vocabulary and activate schema for discussions in class. Subsequent tests and student questionnaires revealed that not all students were making use of the podcasts. My experiences show that while podcasting shows great promise, students are not uniformly infatuated with this new technology. Because the technology and the approach are new, they present some very real challenges for teachers trying to make use of them. In this paper, after a brief introduction to podcasting, I will describe what I did in my classes and the results of my questionnaire and observations of student responses to these activities. The results were not as positive as I had hoped for or expected and after some consideration and literature reviews, I began to form a rubric for instructors to consider when introducing activities involving new technology.

2. Podcasting

Podcasting is a phenomenon that sprang from the use of RSS (Really Simple Syndication) technology and blogs, along with easy-to-use audio recording software. Podcasts are long, often homemade MP3 audio files that can be broadcast to subscribers via RSS feeds (that is, downloaded automatically) and then listened to at their own convenience. RSS plus

aggregating software allow learners to subscribe and automatically receive updates of new content. This content can be kept and organized by learners with this software (the most famous being Apple's iTunes, which is available for free). This description makes podcasts and podcasting sound quite technical, but in practice it is not. To be sure, accessing podcasts requires rudimentary computer literacy and making the podcasts slightly more, but once users are familiar with the basics of accessing and loading files, the convenience of MP3 audio (in contrast with tapes or CDs) and the light weight and large storage capacity of players soon convinces them of the benefits of this system. For language teachers, never before has it been possible to make and deliver audio content to learners so easily, and never before has it been easier to have learners make their own content, which can then be accessed by other class members or just about anyone.

To prepare for using podcasts in my classes, I first made an account at Podomatic <www.podomatic.com>, a podcasting and storage site that helps users make and deliver podcasts. Next, I downloaded Audacity, freely available audio recording and editing software. Then I bought a better quality microphone for the recording process.

3. First Use

With a first-year speaking class of 14 students, I asked students to plan and record their own podcast radio show episode. In pairs, students planned, wrote, edited and then later recorded one episode. The choice of topic was completely done by the students and the instructor's role was limited to only helping to edit content and organizing the recording. One episode was recorded and uploaded to the Podomatic site each week and students were instructed on how they could access it.

The activity was enthusiastically received by students who worked hard at designing, writing and editing their shows. They grasped the idea of a class radio show quickly and produced podcasts on a variety of topics, including summer holiday plans and introductions to their hometowns among others.

At the end of term, in an attempt to assess the activity, a short quiz on the content of the seven podcast episodes was given. Several students were unable to identify the content of any podcast but their own and only one student identified all correctly. This made me understand that several of the students had not listened to any of the podcasts at all, a fact that surprised me, given the students' in-class attitudes toward the making of the podcasts.

4. Second Use

The next two classes I used podcasts for were speaking news article presentation classes with second year students at the same junior college. In the past, student presentations had begun with vocabulary explanations. Vocabulary was written on the board by the presenter while the other students waited. The vocabulary was then explained by the presenter and the presentation began. The original design of the course envisioned student discussions following the presentations, but because of time limitations, there was rarely much time for these discussions in practice. I decided to use the podcasts to move the vocabulary instruction out of the classroom and free up more time for student discussions on the news topics. Students were asked to record a podcast one week before their presentation. Each podcast consisted of an introduction to the topic and an introduction to five or six particularly important vocabulary items that appeared in the article. In addition to preparing student listeners for the vocabulary, I hoped that the introductions would awaken student knowledge of the topic and facilitate

classroom discussion. I also expected that requiring student presenters to record part of their presentation one week in advance - in my presence - would allow me to spot pronunciation and usage errors and ensure that students came to class prepared. At the end of the course, anonymous questionnaires were given and 100% of the 24 students answered them.

5. Questionnaire and Results

The questionnaire asked questions pertaining to podcasting and the use of this activity in our speaking class. The results showed that 11 students had MP3 players (46%), a higher figure than I expected. However, none of those students actually used their MP3 players to listen to the student podcasts. Students were electing to instead use a computer to navigate to the Podomatic page and listen to the audio online, when they listened to them at all. Furthermore, only 2 students (8%) listened to all of the podcasts. 5 students (21%) listened to 70-90% of the podcasts; 4 students (17%) listened to 50% of the podcasts; 6 students (25%) listened to 10-30% of the podcasts; and disappointingly 7 students (29%) listened to 0-5% of the podcasts.

Students provided several answers to the question of why they were not listening to the podcasts more actively. 46% said they had been lazy. 21% said that they had only read the vocabulary on the podomatic site (the vocabulary was written on the web page for each podcast, but the introduction wasn't). Other excuses showed that some students could not access a computer when they wanted (18%) or perceived the activity not to be useful (14%).

Despite the less-enthusiastic-than-expected listening rate, students did evaluate the activity positively, particularly the making of the podcasts. 70% said it was fun to make the podcasts

and 75% said that making the podcasts was useful for preparing for their presentations. Student assessment of the value of listening to the podcasts was slightly lower, but still positive. 67% said that listening to the podcasts was useful in preparing for class and 62% said that the podcasts helped them learn vocabulary.

I also undertook some comparative studies, looking at the differences in results between students who owned MP3 players and those who didn't and between students who listened to more podcasts and students who listened to only a few. Students who owned MP3 players actually listened to fewer podcasts and rated the activity as less fun and less useful (and remember that none of them used their players to listen to the podcasts at all). Encouragingly, however, students who listened to more podcasts rated the activity more positively. One additional comparative check concerned a hypothetical question included in the survey. Asked whether they would listen to podcasts on their cell phones if they could, most students said maybe or yes (12 students and 8 students respectively) and only 4 said they definitely would not. However, it turns out that all of the students who answered definitely not were students who did not own MP3 players. The numbers are small so it may be a coincidence, or it may indicate that in the classes there were several students who are resistant to some new technologies.

6. Getting Speculative

If we look one more time at the results from the questionnaire, it is difficult for an instructor enthusiastic about podcasting not to be discouraged. The activity was mildly successful: the students who participated liked it (mostly), and the more they did it, the more positively they rated it; also, the act of making the podcasts helped to prepare students to make

presentations. However, a large number of students did not listen often and some did not listen at all. Only half of students owned MP3 players and - really most discouragingly - none used them to listen to podcasts. There were also differences among students in the use and appreciation of this technology.

As I tried to understand why the project did not meet with greater success, I went down the list of possible problem areas. I wondered whether podcasting presented a technological challenge for students, specifically problems with access to computers and the listening files (via the web or MP3 player) or a problem of computer literacy. But students had been using computers with several courses for a year and a half and almost all owned flash memory sticks and were familiar with moving files around and using the internet. Also, with two computer rooms available to students, there was surely some time for students to get online (and about half the students reported in first year that they had a computer to use at home).

Next, I wondered whether the task itself was familiar enough to students and whether it was within their range of ability. I wondered whether my instructions had been clear enough and whether students could see what benefit they would get by doing it. It seemed obvious to me that the task was certainly achievable by students and my instructions and explanation had been understandable. And the fact that 100% of the students completed the recording of the podcasts showed that they could and would do what was asked of them. There was nothing therefore impossible with the task in itself.

Thirdly, I considered the learners themselves. The learners in the two classes were second year college students in their final term. Typically, students at that time tend to be focusing more on the next stage (i.e., looking for a job or looking forward to one, or thinking about the

next college they will attend). They tend to be more pragmatic, but they have achieved a good level of proficiency and are usually keen to use it. I knew that they had the autonomy to take control of the task and the learning, but I doubted whether they felt comfortable with integrating technology into their learning.

None of the usual factors stood out as strong reasons why the students had not embraced the task more completely. But as I considered the three areas again - technology, task and learner - it seemed to me that the activity had not succeeded well because of cultural differences that I had not really addressed properly.

For technology, I had an understanding of podcasting that my students simply did not have. I knew about podcasting in use at universities across North America and the UK, but my students saw MP3 players as fashionable music players. Many were using this technology only to record and play CDs and did not know what podcast are or where to access them. Also, for an instructor who spends a considerable amount of time at a computer, it is sometimes easy to forget that many students do not. Part of the reason that podcasting is slow in catching on in Japan certainly lies in the extremely minor role that PCs play in most students' lives. Use of PCs is a quasi-institutional experience for many students in Japan. The PC is not the first place they go for news, shopping, staying connected to friends, or language learning (the tool of preference for students is rather the cell phone). PCs are machines that they use at school or occasionally at home to complete assignments and search for jobs. Without an MP3 player connected regularly to a personal computer where you can keep software or download files, it is practically impossible to take advantage of RSS and podcatching software and get the most out of podcasting.

In addition to differences in the culture of technology, there are also differences in the culture of learning and learners. The culture of traditional classroom-based, teacher-led teaching / learning is still very strong in most institutions and the notions associated with E-learning 2.0 are still hard for many people to understand and appreciate, teachers, administrators and students. It is not surprising that E-learning 2.0 is sometimes labeled a disruptive technology. It is an innovation that is replacing existing LMS technology, something that was new itself only a few years ago. Learning in this new way requires some new literacies on the part of students. Kern (2006) identifies several other literacies in addition to - the need to be familiar with untraditional discourse structures and new notions of authorship, for example. Shetzer and Warschauer (2000, 2001) stress the need to address issues of communication styles, construction of knowledge, research, and autonomous learning, all of which can be very different from the classroom settings that students are used to. And finally, the work of Lam (2000) highlights a new literacy, the need to negotiate new roles and identities and interact socially in a new context. These can be crucial to successful language learning and are certainly some of the many skills that students need to acquire. Hanna and de Nooy (2003) found that in telecollaboration activities the most important element for success was a willingness to be socialized into and follow the discourse rules of the online community. O'Dowd (2003) identified something similar as important for success: a high level of personal involvement. Attending to these issues is essential since as Hampel (2006) found out, the success of online sessions depended on student input, ideas and interaction. These findings once again highlight the need for explicit teaching and careful teacher attention in this type of CALL and the need to get student agreement to take a more active role.

Many researchers have highlighted the need for teachers to take an active role in acclimatizing students to this type of learning. There are a wide range of things that teachers need to do, including structuring content (Levy, 1997), coordinating learner activities (Belz, 2003; O'Dowd, 2003), and helping learners to reflect on language, culture and context (Ware & Kramersch, 2005). To this list, Friesen (2006) adds the important role of addressing what he identifies as the inequalities in use, as well as attempting to understand what is associated with the new technologies. Indeed a large body of evidence now exists for encouraging teaches to take a more active role in this process (Kern, 2006).

7. The Challenges

To summarize, instructors need to do many things to make activities such as podcasting successful in their classroom learning environments. Ensuring equal access is the first thing, and that means teaching the technological literacy needed to access the learning tools, as well as making sure that sufficient computer access is available. It also means understanding the current technological level of students and the culture of their use of technology. Next, by encouraging the use of activities which make use of this technology and this type of learning particularly in a program-wide or institution-wide setting, success can be greatly encouraged. Some students will need new literacy skills and some will need new learning skills. Getting their willingness to learn these new skills will be easier if it is not for only one unusual course. It will also be easier for students to form an identity of themselves as English users (and not just English learners) as well as computer / technology users.

All of these are difficult challenges because instructors will often find themselves swimming against a cultural stream in terms of both technology use and learning expectations. But benefits of this type of learning are too great to ignore.

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