

Chapter 11

Podcasts in Four Categories: Applications to Language Learning

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ABSTRACT

Language instructors often struggle to find useful and learner-friendly podcasts to supplement their language instruction. In an attempt to address this issue, we examined a number of podcasts for their applicability for use in teaching vocabulary and language. Based on this analysis, we identified four categories of podcasts that are useful for the learning process: 1) Discrete Category, 2) ESL-Focused, 3) General Audience, and 4) Superpodcasts. In this chapter, we discuss each category of podcast, providing several examples, and then we explore the strengths and weaknesses of each variety. Finally, we offer pedagogical suggestions to demonstrate ways in which language teachers can effectively use the podcasts to organize both in- and out-of-class language learning activities. As a supplement to the chapter, a wiki is also available that includes a number of podcasts covering a variety of languages: <http://languagepodcasts.pbworks.com/>

INTRODUCTION

In January 2007, there were over 105 language-related podcasts available for subscription from the iTunes® store (O'Bryan & Hegelheimer, 2007), and that number increased to over 900 podcasts covering 35 languages by May 2008 (Rith, 2008). In November 2009, the number of podcasts in

the *Language Courses* listing in the iTunes store had increased to 1,403, with languages ranging from English to less commonly taught languages such as Armenian and Uzbek; most of the iTunes podcasts were available for free. It is important to note that the 2009 number listed above came from an examination of the *Language Courses* listing from the iTunes store only -- it does not represent the enormous number of podcasts (in

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many different languages) that do not directly address learning those languages, or those podcasts not currently listed on iTunes.

There are a number of ongoing podcast-based projects intended to enhance teacher instruction and learning performance at the university level. For example, *IMPALA (Informal Mobile Podcasting and Learning Adaptation)*, involving leading UK universities, is intended to develop teaching and learning by solidifying classroom instruction through the use of podcasting (see <http://www.le.ac.uk/impala/index.html> for more information). Duke University is one of the first schools to initiate a project which implements podcasting to enable students to (1) respond to audio quizzes, (2) listen to teacher feedback on their homework assignments, and (3) produce their oral portfolios. Similarly, Yale University and other top-tier American universities have open courses available for free at the learners' disposal on topics such as psychology, history, fine arts, and chemistry via iTunes U® (where one can find over 200,000 free educational podcasts of academic content).

Given the breadth of podcasts available, the questions for educators become: which podcasts they can use to enhance the learning experience for their students, and how they can best use those podcasts. After a discussion of research into podcasting and education, we will show four categories of podcasts relevant to language learning. We will follow this by a discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of each category, and we will discuss ways in which the podcasts in each category may be applied to language teaching.

Although the sample podcasts discussed in this chapter are all aimed at learners of English, the ideas regarding *how* to use them and *why* these specific podcasts are worthwhile apply to the teaching of many different languages. For a list of potential podcasts for English and other languages, check our wiki at <http://languagepodcasts.pbworks.com/>.

BACKGROUND

Podcasting in Education

A number of researchers have claimed that podcasts can be an effective language-learning tool (Thorne & Payne, 2005; Stanley, 2006; O'Bryan & Hegelheimer, 2007; Lacina, 2008; Bird-Soto & Rengel, 2009). Since most students are now coming to class fully equipped with digital devices, podcasting can create a ubiquitous learning opportunity. As long as these students have any sort of MP3 player, they can access classroom homework or extra teacher-recommended materials while “riding the bus or subway, walking across campus or through a shopping mall” (Thorne & Payne, 2005, p. 386). When podcasts are integrated into the existing syllabus or are used to supplement classroom instruction, these efforts can “spice things up in class” (Stanley, 2006, p. 3) because they add variety to classroom instruction by offering myriad additional activities and useful in- and out-of-class resources. In addition, if podcasts are used in the course, either integrated into the classroom curriculum or independently, they are “likely to increase intrinsic motivation by including both authentic texts, such as interviews with guest speakers, as well as by embracing the motivational appeal inherent in many multimedia-based language learning tools” (O'Bryan & Hegelheimer, 2007, p. 175).

Podcasting for English Language Learners

Podcast episodes can improve listening skills, reinforce speaking strategies, and help to develop students' vocabulary learning (Ducate & Lomicka, 2009). Since many podcasts aimed at English language learners are prepared by native speakers of English, those learners—and particularly those in EFL contexts—will value these authentic speech samples (Fox, 2008). In addition, many podcasts provide digital versions of transcripts, an extra aid

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