

Chapter 5

Teacher Professional Development: Remote Podcasting and Metacognitive Strategies

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ABSTRACT

The teacher as researcher analyzed and documented his own professional development during the implementation of a program aimed at improving students' listening abilities via exposing them to podcasts and familiarizing them with metacognitive strategies. Seventeen senior high school English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners participated in this study, with a second teacher acting as a facilitator. Action research procedures were employed to investigate the researcher's professional development, with the results indicating increases in both his Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPCK) and his teacher efficacy. The findings in this chapter have implications for English teachers tasked with teaching listening and for researchers studying the pedagogical applications of podcasts and metacognitive strategies.

INTRODUCTION

Listening (comprehension) refers to the understanding of the meanings of spoken discourse through bottom-up and top-down processing (e.g., Richards, 2008, Gilakjani & Ahmadi, 2011). The bottom-up processing involves decoding a number of sounds to form larger units of spoken discourse (i.e., words, phrases, clauses, sentences, texts) to understand the spoken language. In other words, to successfully comprehend speech, listeners need to acquire or master the related vocabulary and possess knowledge of sentence structure. In contrast, the top-down processing involves activating listeners' prior background knowledge so as to allow them to understand the meaning of speech, for instance, through raising questions to elicit students' prior knowledge or through providing students with the information related to the subsequent speech or utterances. Listening (comprehension) is critical to language learning (e.g., Dunkel, 1991; Vandergrift, 1999), and provides input which serves as a basis for language acquisition (Krashen, 1991). The relevant literature, however, reveals that listening has heretofore been considered a "passive process" (Schmitt, 2002, p. 193) and, traditionally, the teaching of listening (skills) has occupied only a marginal role in language learning curricula and research (Nunan, 1997). It has generally been assumed that listening skills would be mastered by students automatically. Nowadays, however, teaching and learning listening (skills) have drawn a greater level of attention and interest than they did in the past (Richards, 2008). Teaching listening skills presents a series of challenges for instructors and learners alike. For language teachers, the challenge lies in how to approach listening practice and activities and fit them into teaching practice: how to engage learners in extensive listening activities, how to improve students' listening skills, how to prepare students to be active learners in order to improve their listening comprehension and their use of learning strategies, and so on. For learners, listening comprehension also poses a variety of

challenges, including reduced language forms, rapid speech rates, and a lack of aural input and/or authentic listening materials. To address these challenges, instructors seek to adjust their curricula and teaching practices as they relate to listening, with an aim to empowering learners in their quests to acquire listening skills through exposure to authentic listening materials, prolonged engagement with situations requiring listening, and familiarity with listening learning strategies.

One of the pitfalls of language teaching involves falling into routines involving reliance upon limited and "old-fashioned" listening materials, without supplying learners with interesting and up-to-date resources for listening. With the advent of podcasts, however, instructors and learners have a new option for teaching or acquiring listening skills. For language teachers, having ready access to podcasts represents "a goldmine of materials for teaching listening skills" (Constantine, 2007, para. 1) and allows them to transform their curricula to best meet learner needs through incorporating podcasting into the classroom. Learners are given more listening materials suitable for English as a Second Language (ESL) or English as a Foreign Language (EFL) self-study and listening practice, thereby gaining exposure to easily-accessible authentic listening materials (e.g., news and talks), consisting of audio or video recordings of English native speakers' spontaneous discourse, via audio/video podcasts. The benefits and opportunities which podcasts bring to language learners or listeners have been documented in the literature (e.g., O'Bryan & Hegelheimer, 2007) in different educational settings. In thinking about how to integrate this novel practice of podcasting into their classrooms, teachers must consider the best way to meet student needs. Specifically, they must give thought to the possible benefits and drawbacks of podcasting for their students, taking into account any impinging factors, as well as the transformative impacts on both the curriculum and the teachers' own professional development and teaching efficacy.

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