

3 Podcasting as a language teaching and learning tool

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Abstract

This paper looks back at the last 10 years of the use of podcasting as a language teaching and learning tool. It considers the potential that was identified at the early stages, to the work that has been carried out to evaluate whether this potential has actually been realised. It presents a taxonomy of podcasts that can be used for language learning and suggestions regarding the format of podcasts. It also reports on how users utilise podcasts and on how different audiences have markedly different practices. It concludes that podcasting allows learners flexibility and personalised learning.

Keywords: podcasting, language learning, OER, iTunes, users, evaluation, eLearning, mobile learning.

1. Context/rationale

Podcasting technology became popular around 2004-2005 and in 2005 ‘podcast’ was named ‘word of the year’ by the editors of the Oxford American Dictionary (BBC News, 2005). Since then, podcasting technology has spread, expanded what it can do and become easier to use. This has led to its adoption by individuals, businesses, the arts, the media and, of course, education.

I became interested in podcasting in 2005, after experiencing as a learner how practical having my own teaching resources (audio and video files) on my

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iPod was. As a researcher, I produced a taxonomy of podcasts for language learning based on whether the podcasts were conceived as a language learning resource or not (Rosell-Aguilar, 2007). Podcasts that can benefit language learners include those that teachers and students develop as a language learning activity, and the use of ‘authentic’ existing, audio resources. These may be language learning courses which use podcasts (either at the core of their teaching or as supplementary materials) or the vast amount of authentic materials available online, from news items to programmes about any subject in the target language.

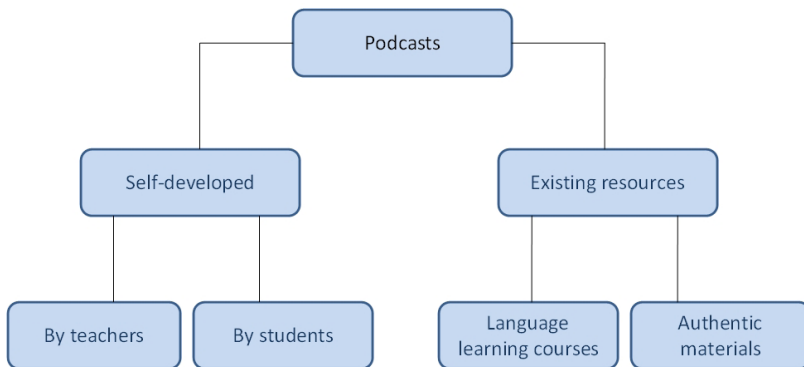
When podcasting became popular, researchers became interested in how it could be used for educational purposes (see Rosell-Aguilar, 2007 for a review of the literature in this area). They quickly identified that podcasting was a convenient and easy to use format. They hypothesised that it would be attractive or ‘cool’ for students, and also motivating. They pointed out that the technology made podcasts easy to access, and that for educational providers it would be good value for money, as podcasts are relatively cheap to produce, and it would give those institutions that provided them good publicity and face value, as they would be seen as using the latest technology. The other big advantage identified was portability: the idea that you could access learning anytime and anywhere.

Podcasting fits with the current movement towards free open-access educational content, as exemplified by Open Educational Resources (OERs) and Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs). These are alternatives to formal study, although they can be combined with it, and bring learning to people who might otherwise not have access to it. Learners do not usually follow a traditional pathway through these, but instead choose what is of interest to them personally.

A subject that was identified early on as one that would clearly benefit from the availability of audio and video resources made available online was modern languages: language teachers had been using audio cassettes, CDs and videos for a long time before podcasting came along. Those audiovisual materials,

however, had to be purchased or borrowed from a library, and their availability was limited. Their audience was people who were interested in learning and made the effort to seek those resources and pay for them. With podcasts, materials became free and easy to find, and also easy to play without the need for language laboratories or multiple devices. Within seconds you could have it in your mp3 player, mobile phone or many other devices (the list has grown immensely and rapidly in the last ten years). In 2007, I proposed a taxonomy of language learning podcasts, presented in [Figure 1](#).

Figure 1. Taxonomy of uses of podcasting for language learning
(adapted from [Rosell-Aguilar, 2007](#), p. 476)



Language learning podcasts vary enormously in terms of design format: long monologues, bite-sized information, interactive conversations, vocabulary lists, phrase of the day, recipes, interviews, news, showcases of student work, etc. They also vary in terms of quality. Like any other resource (videos, CDs, websites) some will appeal to some types of students and others will appeal to other types. In 2007 I suggested that language learning course podcasts should:

- provide exposure to the language and its characteristics;
- use a range of materials, including authentic materials;

- provide explicit learning outcomes with clear objectives within a defined syllabus;
- provide exposure to the culture of the areas where the target language is spoken;
- be engaging and of adequate length;
- have a clear consideration of the medium: including portability and screen size (Rosell-Aguilar, 2007, p. 489).

It would be unlikely for a podcast to do all these, but the list provides a model that more and more podcasts now use.

2. Aims and objectives

Research projects carried out with language learning podcasts have found positive attitudes from users as well as indications of improvement in certain skills, mainly those to do with the aural skills that are naturally better served by podcast as audio resources. A lot of questions remained unanswered in the research about podcast use, however: who downloads podcasts? What for? And how do they use them? Do they learn just as well, better or worse than with other materials?

Researchers started to look at what their students were actually doing with the podcasts and the results were somewhat different from what they had foreseen. They found that learners liked using iPods for learning and found them convenient and attractive, but there was no certainty about whether this was due to the novelty factor. The research also found that listening to educational podcasts was perceived as an academic activity, and that students who took part in the research were not transferring the mp3s to their mobile devices; instead they mostly listened at their computer (Lee & Chan, 2007; McKinney, Dyck, & Luber, 2009; O'Bannon, Lubke, Beard, & Britt, 2011). These findings cast

doubt over some of the potential benefits that had been identified, such as the fact that listening to podcasts would not feel like studying or that podcasting enabled people to listen on the move. However, the research projects that found these results were largely carried out by teachers using their own groups of learners and distributing the podcasts through their university's Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs). Therefore, it was hardly surprising that students perceived the listening activity as an academic activity. Also, because the students who took part had to download the podcasts from their VLE on their computers, it made sense to listen at the same computer without transferring to a mobile device.

The issue was that the results gathered from this type of practice tended to be generalised to all types of podcasting, when in fact they applied only to the context of teachers providing their own students with podcasts.

3. What I did: the iTunesU research project

Without a doubt the largest channel for distribution of educational podcasts is the Apple Corporation's iTunesU. It was launched in 2007 as a method for US and Canadian universities to distribute content for their courses. Some of the content these universities uploaded to iTunesU was restricted to their own students, and some of it was made available to anyone who wanted to download and listen to it. Apple talked about its new service as a 'university in your pocket' and highlighted the unprecedented access to lectures and materials that were previously only available to a minority.

Apple soon invited universities from further afield to join iTunesU, and nowadays universities from many countries offer free materials for download. These include world renowned institutions such as Harvard, Yale, MIT, Stanford, Oxford, Cambridge, and La Sorbonne. As well as the materials from universities, iTunesU now also incorporates resources from other educational institutions, such as colleges and museums in a section called *Beyond Campus*.

iTunesU has become incredibly successful, and it reached its billionth download in 2013. With iTunes podcasts, and iTunesU in particular, the context of learning is completely different to the research carried out beforehand. These resources are being consumed by the general public, people who are not following a formal learning pathway.

To find out more about the use of iTunesU for language learning, I set up a research study based on iTunesU at the UK's Open University (OU). As a distance learning provider, the OU has a 40-year history of delivering high-quality teaching content through different media. iTunesU at the OU was launched in 2008 and now it is one of the institutions that generates the most downloads on iTunesU; it reached 65 million in 2013, making it the largest provider of iTunesU materials in Europe. The three main questions I wanted to answer in my research study were: who downloads podcasts from iTunes U? What do they do with the podcasts? And what do they think of them? I created a survey and a link to it was placed on every iTunesU at the OU page, including its home page.

Over 2000 people took part in the study, of which 455 were language learners. About 60% of the respondents were between 25 and 54. This was surprising to me because previous research participants had been much younger. Only just over 1% of the respondents were under 15 and only about 6% were 15 to 18. People also tend to associate new technologies with men, and there were indeed more men than women among participants. It was not a large difference – 56% men – but considering that there tends to be more women than men enrolled on university courses overall nowadays, it suggested that podcasting attracts more men than women. This may not be the case for much longer, however, because when gender and age were correlated, the data show that in the older age brackets there were more men than women, whereas among the younger users women outnumbered men. Another difference from the participants of previous research into podcasting use was that around 60% of the people who took part in the survey were employed, and fewer than 20% were students. In the previous studies reported in the research, the vast majority of participants were students.

The results of the research have been published in separate articles on different aspects of the project. One focused on all iTunesU learners (Rosell-Aguilar, 2013a) and another on language learners (Rosell-Aguilar, 2013b). Further work on the data also produced insights into mobile learning.

I asked participants why they were interested in the podcasts they downloaded. Only 17% said that it was because these podcasts were relevant to their current studies, around 11% listened because the podcasts were relevant to their profession, and the rest, over 70%, did it because of personal interest. This confirms that most people are part of the general public who are interested in learning without a specific purpose such as work or formal studies. I also asked if the podcasts were the main source of learning for the subject they had an interest in. Whereas only 10% of non-language learners used podcasts as their main method of learning, this doubled to 20% in the case of language learners.

When it comes to what they did with the podcasts, over half of the people who responded to the survey listened on a portable device: their mp3 player or their phone. When asked if listening to the podcasts was something they do as an activity they set time aside for, or if it was something they do as part of another activity, around 55% of non-language learners said they listen whilst doing something else, such as commuting or exercising, whereas for language learners this figure went up to almost 63%. The participants rated the quality of the podcasts very highly, and over 97% said that the podcasts are helping them learn about the subjects they are interested in.

4. Discussion

The results of my research showed a picture of the podcast user and their opinions that is very different from previous research. It suggests the differences in practices have a lot to do with context: where users find these podcasts and why they are listening (whether as formal learners, e.g. a student who is doing homework, or as informal learners). It also shows that for most people listening

to podcasts is not an academic activity and that podcasting can be considered a mobile technology after all; the university really is in your pocket.

It is very interesting that language learners were twice as likely to use podcasts as the main source of learning, and more likely to listening ‘on the go’ whilst doing other activities. It suggests that language learning is perceived by some as something that can be learnt by informal listening only, rather than through formal learning.

It is true that these results are from only one university, but considering the vast majority of respondents were not actually Open University students, it is fairly safe to assume that this profile probably fits many users of iTunesU resources from other universities as well. Since most respondents in my research were not enrolled on any courses, just curious to learn, it probably does not matter to them which university they download podcasts from. They just pick and choose what is of interest, in a similar manner to the way people use OERs or MOOCs. Different resources will appeal to different learners, or to the same learners depending on their mood, location, or preference.

5. Conclusion

The high rating of podcasting as a learning tool is a fantastic response and it means that what universities are doing, putting their materials out there for people to find, is very worthwhile. iTunesU has brought a richness of freely available material that simply was not available to the general public before. It is an enormous public library that can deliver resources straight to your device and into your ears, only you do not have to return the materials afterwards. People do not have to register or pay fees, they do not have time pressures to complete studies by a deadline, and they can pick and choose whatever they like.

The main benefit is that podcasting in general, and iTunesU in particular, allows people to learn whatever they are interested in at their own pace, where they like,

when they like. It is personalised learning in a way that has never been achieved before. It is also bringing learning to all kinds of people from all over the world, who may otherwise be unable or unwilling to access formal education. As an educator, I think that is a great development, and something that everyone involved should be proud of.

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