

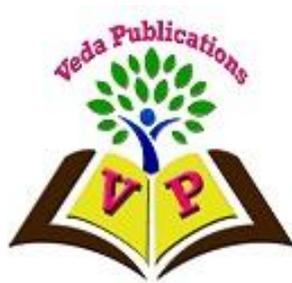


TEACHING ENGLISH USING PODCASTS: CHALLENGES AND POSSIBILITIES

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ABSTRACT



The language that the learners come across in their textbooks and in their classrooms is made to meet an assumed level of English that they are now in. However, in today's world, English is no more limited to the four walls of the classroom and can be accessed anywhere, anytime, any way using technology. Through this the learners realise that the language they learn in the classroom and the language people use in the real world have a lot of differences in terms of the choice (as well as the range) of vocabulary, sentence complexity, topics, etc. This paper presents a case study on how English teachers made use of podcasts to teach English. The study lists the challenges and the possibilities imbued in using podcasts as a resource to teach English. The focus of this paper is to help teachers who have access to the Internet but are yet to explore the possibilities of podcasts for teaching English. Its aim is to show them how podcasts can be integrated into their teaching practices as well.

Keywords: *ICT, Authentic Materials, Podcasts, Educational Technology*



INTRODUCTION

The access to the Internet is shifting the English language teaching and learning landscapes more than ever before. It is redefining the ways in which learners learn and access English in their lives. Earlier English textbook was the primary source for learners' English. However, that is changing now since more and more learners are going online on their own for a variety of reasons and often come across more language than they are exposed to through their textbooks. Teachers can no longer shy away from this fact and have to find ways to integrate 'real-world' English into their teaching. One way to do this is through the use of podcasts – i.e. audio recordings – that are publicly available online. This paper discusses a study on the challenges and opportunities of using podcasts by a group of nine teachers from around the globe. The paper first presents a review of literature on audio learning and then presents the research design and methodology. The data analysis and discussion part explores at length the experiences of these nine teachers in using podcasts. The conclusion expresses a hope that the use of podcasts will eventually become a reality in more and more classrooms across the world.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A survey of the available literature on learning proves that audio learning had always been there as part of distance education since voice recording became widely available. In the words of Durbridge (1984, cited in Edirisingha, Rizzi, Nie, & Rothwell, 2007) there are many benefits to audio learning. She found out that students like learning through audio because they like:

- Responding to sound, e.g. understanding spoken language
- Listening in on conversations
- Hearing facts, discussions and opinions from experts in the field.

Similar feelings are echoed by Scottish Council for Educational Technology (1994, cited in Lee & Chan, 2007) when it says audio is "a powerful stimulus to the imagination". It further adds that audio can be used more effectively to talk learners through a passage and to document discussions and language pronunciation at work. In spite of its

benefits audio learning, in Lee & Chan's, (2007) words, "has been neglected and underused".

It is in this backdrop that podcasts made their appearance with the introduction and instant popularity of iPod and other portable media players. However, the use of podcasts for learning took a while despite it being a part of the audio learning culture that was in vogue before. Even the studies (e.g. McCarty, 2005) on the use of podcast for language learning have focused on the technical issues of creating and distributing podcasts rather than on the theoretical underpinnings of its use for learning or the evaluation of available materials. Chinnery (2006) reported that the use of podcasts had brought an authentic cultural experience to students' learning of foreign languages. Once teachers and learners realised its potential in making learning languages real "podcasting is widely used in language learning, both to access authentic content and to record it" (Chinnery, 2006). For English language learners, in addition to the many parallel sources of information, there are podcast sources like the Voice of America's Special English Programme or the BBC Learning English Series. According to Chinnery (2006), the use of podcasts brings an authentic cultural experience to students' learning of foreign languages.

Rosell-Aguilar (2007) provided a taxonomy of podcast resources and reviewed podcast materials in the light of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) theories. Her taxonomy basically divides podcasts into materials developed by teachers and students and existing resources. The present study focuses on the use of existing podcasts that are not primarily meant for language courses.

Podcasting provides access to authentic materials which has both the potential to provide opportunities to notice vocabulary and grammatical structures as well as for learning about aspects such as the history, culture, and politics of the areas where the target language is spoken. Thus, they become, what Ryan (1997) says, "sources of information about the uses of language". It also has the potential to draw the learners into the communicative world of the target language community (Little 1997). However, Lai (2015) reminds that teachers can shape the quantity and quality of students' self-directed use



of technology for learning outside the classroom through providing three distinct types of support: affection, capacity and behaviour. The findings of her research underscore the pivotal role that teachers can play in enhancing adoption of technology in self-learning.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The data for the present study were collected over the Internet using two distinct tools: an online questionnaire and an online semi-structured interview. The purpose of the questionnaire was to gather the experiences of teachers who have actually integrated podcasts into their teaching. Nine teachers from four different countries responded to the questionnaire. These teachers were teaching English in public as well as private schools at various levels. From the nine teachers who responded to the questionnaire three gave their formal consent to be interviewed. These three teachers were interviewed to understand how the use of podcasts made language learning a real experience for the learners. The interview took place over Skype and was recorded. Later the recordings were transcribed.

DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Teachers who participated in the questionnaire phase of the study reported that they use freely available public podcasts from sites like VOA English, Learning English of the British Council, BBC, etc. in their classrooms. These materials were used in the classroom whenever the lessons allowed the use of complementary materials in terms of theme and topic. Otherwise, the teachers assigned them as optional materials which learners can use according to their interest and time available. In the interviews teachers mentioned that wherever possible podcasts that are chosen by the learners themselves are also incorporated into the regular lessons. This gesture, in their opinion, brings learner autonomy and learner agency into the classrooms.

It was revealed through the study that the teachers who made use of podcasts for learning English have an interest in listening to podcasts. They themselves are avid listeners to a range of podcasts in areas of their interest. They listen to them while travelling to work or in their free time. They believe that listening to podcasts is a worthy obsession which

had helped them to improve their proficiency in English as well as shaped their world view. Their decision to use podcasts in the classrooms is out of their own conviction that the habit of listening to podcasts will help their learners in similar ways.

One of the questions in the questionnaire sought the medium in which these teachers listened to the podcasts that they download. With the arrival of smartphones most of these teachers have started using their phones to listen to podcasts rather than using a dedicated media player. Teachers who bought MP3 players to listen to the podcasts now do that on their smartphones because they feel that they do not have to carry so many gadgets with them anymore for listening.

To the question which sought how they received new podcasts many of them responded that they use certain apps on their phone to download. Some of these apps that they use include iTunes, BeyondPod, Doggcatcher, etc. The task of keeping a track of the newly available podcasts is also assigned to the podcatcher service that these teachers use. Though paid versions are available none of the teachers who participated in the study use any of that and instead relied on the free versions available.

While listening to the downloaded episodes the teachers mentioned that they keep a mental tab on whether the listening material can be used in connection with a lesson in the class. The interviewed teachers reported that they find opportunities where they can use such listening materials in meaningful and relevant learning moments in the class most often thereby helping the students to go beyond the textbook as well as inculcate an interest in listening and specifically to podcasts.

The interviewed teachers mentioned that learners prefer listening to podcasts which have listening transcripts available along with them. This is because in the contexts in which these teachers teach English is either a second (India) or a foreign language (Belgium) and learners appreciate any additional help that they can get in order to understand the English that they hear. If they do not understand, the learners will stop listening as listening no more is enjoyable to them. Three of the teachers who participated in the study said that they keep a track of what the learners listen and suggest



materials that the learners can listen apart from what they listen as a matter of habit. In other words, these teachers who use podcasts in their classrooms take a serious interest in their learners listening habits and encourage them to develop their language proficiency by listening to a variety of resources.

Another interesting thing to note is that the participating teachers who adopted listening to podcasts as a means to make language real for their learners themselves believe that such listening had improved their proficiency in English as well as their awareness about the world they live in. Such a conviction prompts them to encourage their learners to take up listening to podcasts as a means to improve English as well as general awareness.

All the teachers who participated in the study were aware of the fact that all their students do not have access to the Internet at home. As a result these students cannot access and download the podcasts that they like. So a way around which the teachers had devised is to download and keep a set of podcasts for their students in the classroom/staffroom computers from which the students can choose and copy the podcasts of their choice. The three teachers who were interviewed mentioned that they had noticed that even their colleagues (who need not be teaching English) also access such audio resources and listen. Over a period of time these teachers were able to build a repository of listening materials that are ungraded but cover a range of themes and topics that are real.

The interviewed teachers have reported that those learners who like a particular series of podcasts after a period group themselves and form listeners groups where they discuss their thoughts on what they have listened to. Some of them who are on social networking sites take this opportunity to get in touch with the presenters as well as other listeners from different parts of the world thereby turning the whole exercise a 'real' communicative exercise out of their own interest. In addition to this, a few learners while making classroom presentations and projects try to incorporate the ideas that they have gathered from the podcasts proving that the learners assimilate what they listen to in most of the cases.

Learners' interest in listening to what they like has promoted language acquisition as well,

teachers reported. They have noticed that those learners who listen to podcast have picked up vocabulary, sentence structures, ideas, etc. and have started using them in their real life. Since many of these podcast series have a pattern learners find it easy to mimic the language after a few rounds of listening.

In addition to these the freedom to listen in a way that they like makes podcast a ready hit with many learners, said the participating teachers. Learners are no more under pressure the way it happens in the classroom to listen and understand what they hear along with others. Instead, they can listen at their own pace and can stop if they do not feel like listening. Also they can replay what they are listening to as many times as they want in case they do not understand or cannot follow it thereby promoting learner autonomy which is otherwise not available to them in a regular classroom setting. Also there is learner agency in what they are listening to since all the teachers who participated in the study were clear that they do not force or discourage a learner from listening to any type of podcasts.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Through this study the usefulness of podcasts in teaching English is reiterated. With the availability of publicly available podcasts on the rise teachers will always have access to a range of listening materials which they can integrate to the classroom lessons. In addition, learners will never feel that they are being forced to learn English once they had discovered a podcast of their choice and interest. Moreover, the possibility of listening to the downloaded podcasts anytime, anywhere, and any number of times makes learning English a flexible thing where learners have autonomy as well as agency. The problem of all students having access to the Internet at home was addressed through the teachers downloading the episodes and making them available to the students. Thus, providing opportunities to the learners to learn English through podcasts is worth exploring and adopting by the twenty-first century English teachers.

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