

Podcasting for Asynchronous Language Learning

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Computer-aided learning has the potential to provide the language learner with vast resources of authentic materials to supplement written, audio and video materials. Extensive listening materials can be downloaded through the World Wide Web and educators have the possibility of using an array of materials that they can introduce to their students for study during class time or for independent learning outside of class time to encourage learner autonomy.

PODCASTING BACKGROUND

A very good opportunity presents itself with the use of web-based learning of audio and video materials through podcasting. The word “podcast” has become popular recently, especially when referring to the ubiquitous iPod MP3 player produced by Apple Computer. It is important to note, however, that although it may be advantageous to have a portable device to playback the audio and video files, the same functions can be achieved on a computer connected to the Internet. That is to say, a learner can choose to listen to audio podcasts and view video podcasts on a specific web page or through specialized software such as iTunes, which is distributed freely by Apple Computer to Microsoft Windows XP users as well as Mac OS X users.

The precursor to the podcast is the weblog, or “blog.” (Geoghegan and Klass 2005) A blog is an Internet web page that contains information that can be referenced through Really Simple Syndication (RSS) feeds

which provide the means to automatically update the most recent information to the webpage. This technology allows users of the blog to receive the most recent information in a timely manner. At first, simple text headlines were used to bring the most up to date information to the attention of the user, however, enclosure tags were later created to enable applications to retrieve files off the Internet by linking the Universal Resource Locator (URL) to audio or video files that were uploaded on the Internet.

As such, the first audioblogs were posted to the Internet in 2001 and the birth of podcasting can be attributed to this date, since podcasting is an evolutionary product of audioblogs. As these new types of websites began to proliferate so did the need to automate the task so that a portable device could automatically download the latest audio file. The first computer program to automate this task was called "iPodder" which was originally developed by Adam Curry in 2003 (Geoghegan and Klass 2005). Eventually the term "podcasting" became the most popular expression for downloading files from audioblogs and the term became widely used in late 2004.

Why is podcasting so popular? It is not only a way to download audio files from the Internet, it can also be said to be a form of expression, interaction and community building. An increasing number of people are starting their own podcasts, producing their own radio programs, language courses, lectures and a variety of other audio and video programs. Because these podcasts are always associated with a web page, it remains a unique way to share information with the audience and for the audience to provide feedback to the producers through the website. Then the communication is not only one-way, it is two-way and the number of people getting involved as podcast producers and listeners continues to expand exponentially.

One of the main reasons for the popularity of podcasting is the

automated downloading of the episodes. After deciding which podcast a listener wants to listen to, a podcast aggregator (such as iTunes, Juice, or other software) is used to subscribe to the podcast files and newest audio or video programs are downloaded automatically to the computer via an Internet connection. Due to the large size of the files, a fast or broadband connection is necessary for quick downloading of audio and video programs.

FINDING AND LISTENING TO PODCASTS

As with the Internet, finding the right information is a critical task when searching for podcasts. There are thousands of podcasts available for use, however, not all of them are useful for language teachers. When searching for the most appropriate web page, a search engine such as Yahoo or Google is used. Thus, when searching for the most appropriate podcast and downloading it to a computer, a podcatcher or podcast aggregator is used. One of the early website directories to find podcasts is called ipodder.org. This website lists simply a large amount of podcasts organized in an easy and logical manner. When looking for podcasts for ESL students, look at the Educational category, and ESL/EFL for a list of programs. Although this site is useful, it is not the most sophisticated and up to date website.

A more useful and sophisticated podcatcher is the software program released freely by Apple Computer called iTunes. This is a program that can be downloaded for free from the Internet at <<http://www.apple.com/itunes/download/>>. This software program allows the user to view or listen to the podcast on the web by clicking on the links provided by the iTunes software or by downloading the podcast to the iTunes library and then synchronizing the podcast to a portable device such as an iPod <<http://www.apple.com/itunes/sync/>>. Searching for a language learning podcast on iTunes is simple. After launching iTunes, click on

“iTunes Store” on the left side of the window in the application, and then click on “Podcasts.” Then, under Quick Links, which is on the right side of the window in the application, click on “Browse.” Next, under Category, click on “Education.” Finally, click on “Language Courses” in the Subcategory window. The lower half of the window will display a list of language courses, such as English, French, Chinese and many others, in alphabetical order. As of October 2006, 222 podcasts were listed in this category (Fig. 1). After locating a podcast of interest, the user can listen to a single episode by double clicking on a title, or subscribe to the podcast by clicking on the subscribe button on the right side of the window in iTunes.

Another popular podcast aggregator is Juice <<http://juicereceiver.sourceforge.net/index.php>>, which was formerly called iPodder. Some people prefer this software because it can be used with the iPod and other

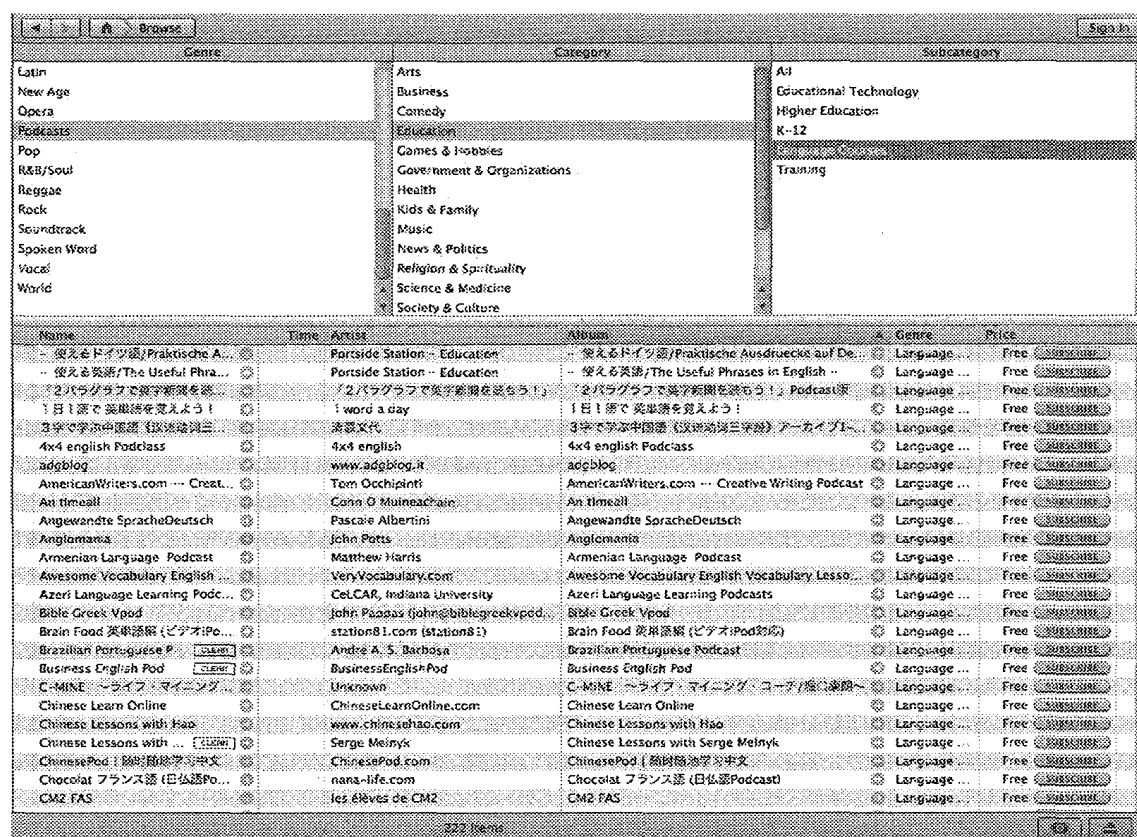


Figure 1. Screen capture of iTunes software showing language course podcasts.

MP3 players. There are other podcast aggregators available on the Internet, but it is beyond the scope of this paper to go into these details here.

INCORPORATING A PODCAST INTO THE SYLLABUS

There are two approaches that can be used by a language teacher who is interested in using podcasting as a tool for learning. The first is to create your own podcast and the other is to use a podcast or podcasts that are freely available on the Internet. I will explore both possibilities here.

Creating a podcast

There are a number of ways to produce a podcast: notwithstanding the technical complications, the most important factor to consider is content. A novice can read the computer and software specifications, acquire a computer and recording equipment and learn how to program in XML to develop a professional looking podcast. However, without content, there is little value for learning. Planning the content of the podcast prior to the production process is the most productive way of proceeding.

Developing a podcast is like planning a syllabus. There are quantitative elements to consider; such as how many lessons, how much time per lesson and how much material to cover, as well as qualitative elements; what level of language is appropriate for the learner, what are the goals and objectives and needs of the learner?

Thus, for a podcast the questions might be: How many podcast episodes will be produced? How much time will each episode be? Who will do the recording? These were some of the questions that we asked each other when Bill Pellowe (English Instructor at Kinki University, Japan) and I developed our original podcast, ELTPodcast. Fig. 2

For this podcast, we anticipated producing three levels of English

conversations for beginner, intermediate and advanced learners, respectively. We had planned to develop ten different conversations for each level and to include different topics for each one so that if a learner listened to all thirty conversations, there would not be too much repetition of expressions and phrases. As of this writing, we have completed ten basic and six intermediate conversations, therefore this remains a work in progress.

When producing the beginner conversations we had two factors in mind. One was the length of the conversation, the other was the speed.


eltpodcast

HOME | Archive | Help

ELT stands for English Language Teaching. These audio files are for students of English. On this page, you'll find our most recent recordings. Please click "Archive" above for our complete list.


ELT Podcast - Basic Conversations for EFL and ESL

Theme-based conversations and language practice for students of English, such as EFL, ESL and ESOL. The dialogs have two or more speakers. Read transcripts and listen to mp3 files.

Subscribe  (free)

Basic Conversations - How long are you staying?

When are you leaving?
By: Robert Chartrand and Bill Peltowe
Broadcast date: Saturday, July 1st, 2006

listen 

type mp3
size 2.32 MB
time 4:49

You'll hear this basic conversation two times. First, at a normal speed, then at a slower speed. After that, you'll hear short practice dialogs. Then it will be your turn to fill in the conversation with your own phrases.

Conversation
Bill: Hi Robert! What's up?
Robert: I'm going to the U.S. next week.
Bill: Oh, really? I didn't know that. Where are you going?
Robert: I'm going to Tampa.
Bill: Where's that?
Robert: In Florida.
Bill: What are you going to do there?
Robert: I'm going to visit my family. My grandmother lives there.
Bill: That sounds nice. When are you leaving?
Robert: On Saturday March 11th.
Bill: How long are you staying?
Robert: A couple of weeks.

Read & Listen on your iPod!

Robert: Did you have a nice weekend?
Bill: Not bad. I went to the movies on Saturday night.
Robert: Oh yeah? What did you see?
Bill: I saw the new Harry Potter movie.

Click here to see how!

Most recent:

- What happened? (Aug 3)
- How has your summer been so far? (Jul 21)
- The Weather (Jul 3)
- Basic Conversations - How long are you staying? (Jul 1)
- Part-Time Job (Jun 30)

Figure 2. Screen capture of the eltpodcast homepage.

We wanted to speak at natural speed, but we also thought this would limit the ability of the students to understand English at natural speed, thus we decided to do both. When a listener listens to the podcast, one hears the conversation at natural speed first, then at a slower speed and then once more at natural speed. The reasoning for this was to give the learner repetitive input so that the language processing could take place consecutively. Towards the end of the podcast we also included a short practice drill for extended practice and to allow the learner to experiment with the language.

In the intermediate conversations podcast, we did not include the slower speed speech as in the beginner podcast. Instead, the conversations tend to be little longer and the practice conversations are more extensive. Moreover, the conversations use more idiomatic expressions.

In the near future, we would like to complete the intermediate conversations podcast and start a new series of advanced conversations. For the highest level, we would like to include more natural conversations with less scripting involved. For the lower levels, we wrote the script before recording the audio in order to include a specific set of vocabulary range and expressions. For the advanced level, however, we do not plan on writing a script before recording the audio, but to talk about a certain event or topic that will be the focus of the conversation. In all cases, there is some editing involved and we try to maintain a good balance of clear audio and file size. All of the podcasts are at most about five minutes long, so as to keep the file size between one and three megabytes in size. The smaller file size enables the computer to download the file more quickly and the learner does not spend too much time waiting for the podcast to begin.

Equipment

We used the following equipment for recording our podcast: An

Audio-technica microphone, a Roland Edirol UA-3FX USB audio capture unit and an iMacG5 personal computer (Apple Computer). The following software was used to record, edit and mix the recordings: SoundStudio 3 (Freeverse Software), GarageBand 3 (part of the iLife '06 software package by Apple Computer), and iTunes 7 (Apple Computer). The eltpodcast website was programmed and designed by Bill Pellowe.

Podomatic

Until recently, podcasting had been restricted to technically inclined people who could invest a large amount of time and money to produce audio programs for the Internet. These days, however, digital audio recording has become easier and cheaper to use, especially when using the built-in hardware and software of new computers. The most popular way for people to upload podcasts to the Internet is to use a free website that is dedicated to this purpose, PodOmatic<<http://www.podomatic.com/>>. A language teacher can record his or her voice by using similar equipment as noted earlier and save the audio file on the hard disk to be transferred later to PodOmatic. As stated by Akcaoglu (2006), PodOmatic is a really user-friendly, click-and-go website. By completing a very simple sign-up form, users are introduced to the almost endless world of podcasting. For the technically challenged language teacher, PodOmatic provides a free and easy solution for podcasting.

Using a podcast that is readily available on the Internet

There are various podcasts available for language learners. As classified by Stanley (2005), they are teacher podcasts, student podcasts and authentic podcasts. Teacher podcasts are produced by teachers mostly for their own classes and are aimed at helping students learn by producing listening content that is not available elsewhere. Student podcasts are produced by students, but often with teacher help, to practice speaking

and to hear about the lives and interests of other students. Authentic podcasts are not aimed at ELT students, but can be a rich source of listening. Most authentic podcasts are suitable for only higher level students, but some, such as The Medical Minute Podcast are very useful for students of English for specific purposes (ESP), such as nursing or medical students. Authentic podcasts should be chosen carefully, considering the ability of the students and content of the podcast. However, these authentic materials are a valuable resource and should be used if possible.

Using a podcast in a lesson

According to Ellis (2003), listening tasks provide an excellent means for measuring whether learners have acquired the feature in question and can be devised to facilitate the acquisition of the targeted structure. In the past, however, it had been difficult for teachers to introduce listening materials to students. Copyright infringement prevented most teachers from copying materials that had been bought as listening materials and was restricted to classroom use. Podcasts, however, are not susceptible to this issue as they are part of the public domain. Students can download the podcast to a computer, export it to a portable device and listen it on the bus, a train, or at home.

A teacher can introduce a podcast to the class, explain how to find it and download it and play it for the students. If there is a computer available in the room the teacher can simply play it directly from the computer or portable device such as an iPod. If there is no access to a computer or portable device, the teacher can burn a CD with the podcast and broadcast it to the class with a portable CD player. The teacher can assign the podcast as a dictation, or as a cloze exercise. The teacher can ask comprehension questions to the students or the podcast can be the starting point of a conversation. Moreover, the technology has evolved to the point where these days, video podcasts have become more affordable

and video clips can also be introduced to enhance the visual and audio elements of a lesson. Video podcasts can be used to introduce the scenery of a country, to show the behavior of animals or even to show a music video or movie trailer. The possibilities are ever expanding and the cost for downloading these materials is usually free.

Recommended sites:

- <http://www.eltpodcast.com/>

Developed by Robert Chartrand and Bill Pellowe. Contains ten beginner and six intermediate conversations with transcript on the webpage. The transcript also appears on an iPod when listening to this podcast, by clicking on the center button. This feature is not available to all podcasts because it requires some extra programming for enhanced podcasts.

- <http://www.eslpodcast.com/>

Developed by Dr. Lucy Tse and Dr. Jeff McQuillan. They believe that the fastest way for a student to improve his or her English is to listen to conversations and discussions that can be understood. At ESL Podcast, they provide English at a slower speed and use everyday phrases and expressions. They explain what these expressions mean and how to use them.

- <http://abcnews.go.com/Technology/Podcasting/>

The Medical Minute video podcast by ABC News is an excellent source for materials for teaching English to the medical profession. It is a one-minute video program about one aspect of medical news. Although the language is somewhat technical, the podcast is intended for the general public so it is not too difficult.

- <http://genkienglish.net/adultsongsj.htm>
Developed by Richard Graham. Learn English through Hip Hop songs. Good for children and adult learners. Contains fourteen free episodes.
- <http://iteslj.org/links/ESL/Listening/Podcasts/>
Developed by the Internet TESL Journal. This site contains a number of links to podcasts of interest to students and teachers of ESL. Valuable resource.
- <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/podcasts/>
Video podcasts developed by The National Geographic Society. This site includes short five-minute video podcasts of society, animals and places. Excellent resource.
- <http://www.voanews.com/english/podcasts.cfm>
Developed by Voice of America. Includes news and current events for English as a second language students.
- <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/4977678.stm>
Produced by the British Broadcasting Corporation. Includes video and audio podcasts of news and other events.
- <http://www.audible.com>
Developed by Audible. This commercial site contains a large number of audio books, newspapers and magazines in audio files and podcasts.

Conclusion

In this article, I have attempted to introduce the reader to the possibilities of using podcasts as asynchronous learning material for language learners. The resources I have presented are for English learners,

however, the same possibilities exist for other languages as well. A quick search on the Internet and podcast directories will enable the language teacher to find appropriate materials for his or her students. The possibilities of using podcasts for language learning are far-reaching, however, the affinity of students using podcasts for language learning is not yet clear. This would be a good subject for further research.

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