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Podcasts: new materials for teaching listening comprehension*

Podcasts: just another high-tech hype?

The word Podcast has been declared word of the year by the New Oxford American Dictionary (BBC News at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/technology/4504256.stm>). The term is defined as “a digital recording of a radio broadcast or similar program, made available on the internet for downloading to a personal audio player”. The word is derived from a combination of “broadcasting” and “iPod”. An iPod, for those who don’t know yet, is the popular small MP3 music player produced by Apple.

Apple has included Podcasts in their iTunes programme. This is a program you can download and install for free on both Macs and PCs. iTunes is a music player, but it is also a programme that allows you to download music legally in the Apple music store. The idea of a podcast is that you can listen to a programme any time any place on your MP3 player, be it walking your dog, sitting on a bus or in a train or while driving your car. New car stereos now come with a USB-connection, but your MP3 players can also be easily connected to older car stereo’s cassette recorders by means of a dedicated cassette that connects to your MP3 player. Teachers who have an iPod or MP3 player can of course also connect their iPod to the stereo they use to play tapes or CDs in class. Finally, you can often download the podcasts and burn them on a CD.

Podcasts and language learning

Since iPods are very popular among teenagers and many of them have an MP3 player of one kind or another, podcasts may be recommended for

giving students additional exposure to the spoken language, something they often lack in the regular classroom. If students have specific interests, they may find podcasts on many different subjects. This makes it possible to cater for individual tastes. Rather than pointing out specific podcasts in selected areas such as sports or high-tech, I’d recommend telling your students where they can find a podcast that may possibly interest them, for instance in the iTunes podcast selection.

Podcasts do not differ fundamentally from texts spoken on cassettes or CDs. Teachers have always recorded programmes from the radio or the internet onto a cassette or a CD. With podcasts it is just easier. You subscribe to a podcast and each time an update (a new instalment or a new programme) is available it is automatically downloaded to your computer. If you think it is suitable you can keep it, or you just delete it. So you do not have to be at home or program your recorder, it is all done automatically.

In the Apple music store you can go to the podcast section, which shows you a lot of available podcasts. If you are in search of a podcast in another language, say you live in Switzerland, but want English language podcasts, you can access e.d. the UK music store and subscribe to a podcast in the UK store.

Some examples suitable for language learning

Podcasts I personally like very much are BBC-programs such as *From Our Own Correspondent (FOOC)* or *In our Time*. The latter is a fairly intellectual programme suitable only for

the higher levels and in academic learning contexts. FOOC contains four or five rather short (4-8 minute) reports from all over the world on a great variety of topics, often related to world news, but generally with a specific emphasis. I think they are excellent stuff for practising listening comprehension at let’s say the B1 level and upwards. You will find them at <http://bbc.co.uk/radio/downloadtrial/subscribe.shtml>. This site also contains technical information and help on downloading podcasts.

Learners listening to English generally would like some help whenever they have not understood a particular section or word. Some podcasts come with transcripts, so that you can listen and read the transcript.

Some American podcasts especially designed for language learning often use slow speech. This is the case with the English as a Second Language Podcast at <http://feeds.feedburner.com/EnglishAsAsecondLanguagePodcast>, but also available in the Swiss Apple store. However, this artificially slowed down speech will not be appreciated by all students.

National Public Radio is an excellent source for American English. ‘Story of the Day’ is interesting and usually short (4 to 6 minutes) (<http://www.npr.org/rss/podcast.php?id=1090&uid=eff80d46a1b7860e35cf4759f9b37dd2>).

‘To the best of our knowledge’ is also quite good, in that it features a weekly interview with some interesting personalities from science, literature, etc. (<http://www.npr.org/rss/podcast.php?id=510011&uid=f39cbe3cf7db5718164e7e0980c4be27>) but it is a bit long.

Flo-Joe, the site that helps student with the Cambridge exams, has a fun podcast which is designed as a radio show. A real challenge for even C1



learners, very natural, complete with ad-libbing and jokes and irony at www.splendid-learning.co.uk/podcast/index.html

Using podcasts in class

A podcast may be used just to provide motivated students with additional language input. However, if you wish to use them in class you need to spend time on selecting suitable ones and develop tasks and activities to guide your students in the listening process. These often involve activities to mobilize the students' prior knowledge of the subject of the podcast (pre-listening activity), some while-listening activities and some post-listening activities. For the while-listening activities some true-false questions the students can check while listening also help them to concentrate on the text. In the post-listening stage you can focus on specific vocabulary items and –if available- hand out the transcript. Since checking listening comprehension is often rather tiresome in class, I recommend asking students to answer the questions while listening and compare their answers with a classmate afterwards. If they have different answers a second listening becomes far more interesting, since they will focus on the items on which they had different answers. This is, by the way, a technique useful for any listening comprehension activity and not only for podcasts.

Making your own podcast

It is not too difficult to make your own podcast. In fact, many podcasts available are not professionally made and you hear it right away! The quality is often rather poor and the contents far less interesting than the ones that are professionally produced. If you are interested in creating your own podcast or having your students make one, you can find the necessary information on the internet.

Podcasts pour FLE

La plupart des podcasts qu'on trouve sur internet sont en anglais. Toutefois pour français langue étrangère il y a le Lille podcast, Communication et cours de français pour les non-francophones qui veulent améliorer leur niveau. On trouve ce podcast contenant aussi une transcription du texte sur <http://houzekat.free.fr/lillepodcast>

Podcasts für Deutsch als Fremdsprache (DaF)

Die Deutsche Welle hat einen Podcast, Langsam gesprochene Nachrichten (http://rss.dw-world.de/xml/podcast/langsam_gesprochene_nachrichten). Dieser Podcast gibt auch eine Transkription der Sendung zum mitlesen oder als Kontrolle nachher. Auch auf der Seite <http://www.deutschlern.net/> stehen einige Podcasts, Hier kann man auch den Podcast, Guter Umgang - Deutsch lernen mit der deutschen Umgangssprache' abonnieren. Viele technische Informationen und eine ganze Reihe deutschsprachiger Podcasts findet man auf der Seite www.podcast.de.

Podcast per l'italiano lingue 2

Per l'italiano non ho trovato molti podcast. Una collezione molto interessante sono i programmi della RSI

(Radio della Svizzera Italiana), messi a disposizione come podcast sul sito www.rtsi.ch/podcast. Specialmente raccomandabile è il podcast 'La Costa dei Barbari' www.rtsi.ch/podcast/rss/costa_dei_barbari.cfm. Però, per godere appieno di questi programmi occorre un buon livello di padronanza della lingua italiana.

Vodcast

Finally, vodcasting is the latest trend. It is a kind of video on demand. You can subscribe to a video and watch it either on your computer or your video iPod. I have not found anything than commercial examples, such as a BMW-commercial. They are obviously harder to produce professionally than just the audio podcasts. In addition, I believe in listening to music and podcast on a MP3 player, but watching video? I wouldn't....

Conclusion

In this article I have tried to explain what a podcast is and how it can be used for listening comprehension activities either in class or by students individually on their MP3 players. The text in a podcast does not differ fundamentally from a text on a cassette or CD. Podcasts can make life easier, but the selection of suitable podcasts and the preparation of accompanying materials will remain.

Note

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