

Podcasting: A Learning Tool for Students of English as a Lingua Franca

Podcasting: リンガフランカとしての英語に適した学習ツール

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the article is to demonstrate podcasting as an English learning tool for ELF students. Podcasts (listening) and podcasting (speaking) provide a contemporary and appealing medium of language learning for the digital native students of today. This classroom-practice article will explain how to create an academic podcast in the context of Tamagawa University and demonstrate examples of how podcasting can provide new and meaningful learning practice experiences for ELF students in and outside the language classroom.

KEYWORDS: Podcast, Podcasting, Student Talk-time, Motivation, Task-based Approach

1. INTRODUCTION

As a language teacher at Tamagawa University, one of my personal goals is to maximize meaningful student talk time (STT), whereby students have more opportunities to experiment with and personalize the language and content taught in ELF class, as well as steer conversations towards their individual interests. In order to integrate more STT, I decided to use podcast technology in my classroom and for homework.

According to Wikipedia, Podcast is a portmanteau of “(i)Pod”, a media player developed by Apple, and the term “broadcast” (Podcast, para. 1). The Merriam Webster Dictionary states that podcast is “a program (as of music or talk) made available in digital format for automatic download over the Internet” (Podcast, def. 1). Podcasting is to create such files and make them available for downloading. I believe podcasting stimulates and motivates the digital native students to actively participate in speaking activities inside and outside the classroom.

2. PODCASTING IN MY ELF CLASS

One of the two designated textbooks in the ELF classes I teach is designed to develop academic reading skills and features the Academic Academic Word List (AWL).

I use podcasting technology regularly and frequently in my classes to practice and reinforce general and academic vocabulary, syntax, and reading skills that students learn in each unit of the academic reading textbook. The subject of the podcasts that students listen to and the podcasts they make are based on the thematic contexts of each unit, which includes AWLs and reading passages of individual units of the academic reading textbook.

2.1. Practicing and Reinforcing Lessons Through Podcasts

For each unit of the academic reading textbook, students produce two podcasts. The first podcast (textbook content) is based on the lesson which allows meaningful speaking practice and longer STT. Students then listen to authentic podcasts to model their second podcast on. The second podcast (original content) is an extension of the lesson in which students are able to personalize the topic and produce original content.

2.1.1. Offline Podcasting with Textbook Content

Before students create their first podcast, they review AWL target vocabulary words from the unit. Students then watch a short pre-unit video to engage them in the topic and activate prior knowledge. Students discuss three “before-you-read” questions to further activate their knowledge and prepare them for the reading passage.

After completing the reading task, students review the three “before-you-read” questions. During this revision, students are expected to use a specific communication structure in their conversation (See Table 1). Students are also required to record and save this speaking task using a voice recorder application, for example, Voice Memos in iPhone, for the purpose of self-assessment (talk time and target vocabulary). During this task students are conscious of their surroundings and the task goal which motivates and influences their speaking task directly. The minimum talk time, four minutes, challenges and encourages them to provide longer and detailed answers during this speaking task. However, students often overuse the target vocabulary, due to which conversations produced are often unnatural and redundant.

Table 1

Conversation structure for “Before You Read” questions

Strategy		Example Conversation
Student A:	Get Attention	Let me tell you what happened to me the other day.
	Orientation 1	I bought some milk and flour to bake a cake for my mother. The next day when I was all ready to bake, I realised my mistake--I forgot to put it in the fridge. I had to throw the milk away.
	Question 1	Have you ever forgotten to put milk in the refrigerator? What happened?
Student B:	Answer 1	Yes, once I forgot to put milk in the refrigerator and my pet cat drank it all up!
	Orientation 2	We really must be thankful for the refrigerators that keep our food fresh.
	Answer 2.1	Also other technologies like pickling and canning.
	Question 2	What are some different ways that grocery stores keep foods fresh?
Student A:	Answer 2.2	I go to a small grocery store. They only have a small cool box. But I see them sprinkle cold water on fruits and vegetables every now and then. They also keep some fruits in air-tight containers. Maybe, that helps in preserving food for a longer time.
	Orientation 3	I don't know much about preserving food or growing food.
	Answer 3.1	I've also never visited a farm.
	Question 3	Have you ever visited a farm? What was growing there?
Student B:	Answer 3.2	Yes, I have. Actually, my father is a farmer. We grow rice, potatoes, radishes. We also grow lotus roots. It's a lot of hard work.
	End conversation	Hey, do you want to visit my farm during summer break?

Note: The conversation questions are from the designated textbook

2.1.2. Listening to Authentic Podcast Content

In order to expose students to natural and authentic language, one or two model podcasts, based on the theme of the lesson, are provided to them for listening. Podcasts whose contents are well organized, short (less than 10 minutes), easy to follow, and are produced by educational institutions or academic in content are selected. Preference is given to podcasts with additional online content, such as worksheets and transcripts, which can be downloaded for free.

2.1.3. Podcasting Original Content

In this task students role-play a talk show involving an interviewer and an interviewee. The interviewer selects eight to ten main questions adapted from the

textbook unit they are on. Interviewers discuss the questions with the interviewees and plan further follow-up questions. During the planning process students may write a script of their talk but may not read from it during the actual task. Students then record (audio only) their talk show. Finally, students upload the interview transcript and audio file on the class course management system for assessment and for fellow students to listen/comment. As an added challenge, students may be asked to, for example, make worksheets based on the conversation and/or annotate the transcript. In this task students are able to personalize the content of the lesson and become familiar with new material. The task also increases STT and reinforces the target vocabulary and syntax they have learned in that particular unit or previous units.

3. CHALLENGES OF PODCASTING ONLINE

Podcasting is a new and rapidly developing technology. However, its full potential in the classroom may be limited by privacy issues, resources available in the class, and teacher's workload. To deal with these issues the podcasts in my classes are either offline or on class course management systems.

As for the possibility of online podcasting in my future classes, I intend to ask students to podcast their best contents online--one online podcast per semester. I hope this will motivate them to bring forth their individual interest and create better podcast contents. As online podcasts can be viewed by others outside the class, I believe students will be challenged to do their best. I will create video tutorials for students in simple English so that they will learn to release their best podcasts online.

4. CONCLUSION

In my observations, podcasting created and significantly enhanced STT in my ELF classes. As students got accustomed to the mechanics of podcasting, they paid more attention to meaningful communication. As a result, conversations/roleplays became longer and the interview questions became more diversified. Through the above independent speaking tasks (in class and outside class) I was able to motivate and consolidate their learning, and assess their progress.

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