Podcasting for Language Learning Using an Integrated Approach

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Abstract: Podcasts are a rich source of language input and an alternative to ready-made pedagogical materials that can be freely incorporated into content-based instruction or skill-based classes. This paper argues that when developing language lessons with the use of podcasts, it is important for language teachers to consider an integrated way to provide effective conditions for language acquisition. To explore the potential of podcasts for language learning, this paper discusses their instructional benefits and recommends that podcasts should be integrated into task-based learning lessons via a WebQuest approach, with consideration of second language acquisition principles pertaining to extensive input and comprehensible input.

Keywords: English as a foreign language, podcasts, WebQuest, task-based learning

1. Educational benefits of podcasts

English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers often find it challenging to expose students to authentic speech by native speakers and provide meaningful opportunities for communicating in the target language in and out of the classroom. However, the emergence of podcasting appears to offer rich source of material for use in an EFL context and to assist foreign language instruction in general. Lazzari [5] defined podcasting as "a method for distributing digital video and audio contents over the Internet" (p.27). Podcasts enable students to choose when and where to learn and to do so at their desired learning pace and path. Moreover, podcasts can be easily downloaded, shared, and even edited, granting learners more control and ownership of their learning. Given the flexibility to adopt and adapt podcasts according to individual needs, students are generally more engaged in the learning process and learning outcomes are thus believed to be maximized.

In developing a taxonomy of podcasting for language learning, Rosell-Aguilar [6] identified two major uses: creating podcasts and using already available ones. This paper focuses on the latter, the use of existing podcasts as language learning resources. In the foreign language classroom, podcasts are a rich source of language input that can serve as an alternative to ready-made pedagogical materials and can be freely incorporated into content-based instruction or skill-based classes. EFL teachers can access or subscribe to authoritative and authentic podcasting services (e.g., BBC Learning English) and then use the downloaded audio or video podcasts for in-class practice. EFL teachers can also ask their students to subscribe to podcasts in any content area to enable self-study after class. While these are common practices in and out of school, such uses of podcasts may not lead to sustained and quality learning experiences, due to a lack of systematic integration and learning guidance. Accordingly, this paper argues that when developing language lessons with existing podcasts, it is important for EFL teachers to consider an integrated way to provide effective conditions for language acquisition.

2. WebQuest as an integrated approach to using podcasts for language learning

One integrated approach to using podcasts for language learning is through WebQuests. According to the definition provided on the official website of the WebQuest Research Consortium, a WebQuest is "an inquiry-oriented lesson format in which most or all the information that learners work with comes from the web." As research on uses of WebQuests have grown, the idea has been expanded to refer to an instructional approach that makes use of online resources structured in this specific format [3].

Since the launch of WebQuest by Bernie Dodge and Tom March in 1995, the structure of this format has been refined to five major segments in the form of web pages: 1) Introduction, 2) Task, 3) Process, 4) Evaluation, and 5) Conclusion, with one optional segment, 6) References. The Introduction page orients learners to the task by providing some background information or a scenario to explain that they will be "learning by doing" during the WebQuest. The Task page provides an overview and explanation of the learning task. The Process page details a set of clearly described steps, interwoven with teacher selected Internet resources (often in hyperlinks), which direct the learners to examine the information to complete the task. The Evaluation page includes an assessment to evaluate the learners' performance in relation to the learning objectives of the task, or offers a rubric for the learners' self-evaluation of their learning development. The Conclusion page summarizes what the learners should have learned in the WebQuest and invites them to reflect on their learning. As an optional component, the References page is often labeled differently, such as Teacher Page or Resources. This usually includes: additional learning resources pertaining to the core task of the WebQuest, information sources embedded in all the pages of the WebQuest, or any other relevant information that the WebQuest creator deems helpful (e.g., credits, acknowledgements, or teacher guides). Altogether, these segments are designed in a structured format to guide learners through WebQuests in a sequential presentation of web pages.

Conventional WebQuests are often created using HTML editors or stand-alone web design applications (e.g., Notepad and Dreamweaver), which requires educators to have knowledge of HTML and web design. This prerequisite of technological literacy may discourage educators who have limited time and computer skills from becoming contributors and users of WebQuests. Fortunately, the advent of Web 2.0 technology has made the creation of WebQuests much easier. Web 2.0 authoring tools, such as Google Sties, allow teachers to easily create and edit web pages with a few clicks of a mouse button. Given the ease of creation, this paper proposes that language-learning podcasts can be seamlessly integrated into WebQuests using Web 2.0 authoring tools, to provide focused and contextualized materials that allow for skills development in an input-rich, task-based learning environment.

3. Designing effective WebQuests with integrated podcasts for English learners

When designing WebQuests with podcasts as a source of content integration, language teachers should attend to Second Language Acquisition (SLA) principles, particularly extensive input [2] and comprehensible input [4] as follows.

3.1 Podcast integration in WebQuests should be designed to offer extensive input.

Dodge [1] suggested the following five guiding principles for designing a WebQuest: 1) Find great sites, 2) Orchestrate your learners and resources, 3) Challenge your learners to think, 4) Use the medium, and 5) Scaffold high expectations. As applied to the case of

integrating podcasts into WebQuests, the first and foremost guiding principle of "find great sites" is translated into a commitment to locate rich and relevant podcasts of adequate length in support the desired learning task. Given that exposing learners to rich and meaningful input in the target language is a prerequisite for language acquisition, teachers should "(a) make resources available and (b) provide learner-training in how to make effective use of the resources" [2, p.218]. In addition, teachers may provide pre-task exercises to make the key linguistic points more salient and prime students with the necessary linguistic skills (e.g., vocabulary and grammar) required for the learning task in the WebQuest.

3.2 Podcast integration in WebQuests should be modified to offer comprehensible input.

Many researchers and educators have embraced the potential of WebQuests to enhance learning motivation, critical thinking skills, and collaboration skills [3]. While numerous WebQuests have been developed by content area teachers, "most lacked the linguistic supports that [English language learners] are likely to need" [9, p.41]. To make existing WebQuests appropriate for use with English language learners, the content and design of the WebQuests have to be carefully modified to ensure quality learning and match students' proficiency levels. Accordingly, Sox and Rubinstein-Avila [7] proposed a rubric centering on the linguistic, multimedia and organizational features of WebQuests for teachers to cater to the specific needs of English language learners and make input more comprehensible. Such adaptations are considered as an essential step in the utilization of podcasts for language learning through the WebQuest approach.

In sum, this paper advocates for the integrated use of podcasts in WebQuests to aid language learning. The proposed approach allows learners to access podcasts as extensive and comprehensible input in a task-based and contexualized manner under the WebQuest infrastructure. A research agenda examining the learning effects of podcasts based on this integrated approach is thus needed to provide empirical guidelines for future applications of podcast pedagogy.

Acknowledgement

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