Developing Students’ Listening and Speaking Skills through ELT Podcasts

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The last year and a half have seen rapid advances in podcasting, a new technology for broadcasting audio programmes on the Internet (Selingo, 2006). As the title of a journal article published in November 2005 shows, “podcasting is so last year; now podcasting is hot” (Balas, 2005). Podcasting was originally for conveying information and entertainment. But soon educators saw the huge potential it has for teaching and learning (Warlick, 2005; Adams, 2006). Jobbings (2005), for example, has asserted that there are so many possible uses of podcasts that ultimately, the creativity and imagination of teachers and learners will drive the educational podcasting agenda in future. Jobbings suggests three areas where the potential of podcasting could be realised within schools: devising cross-curricular activities; providing alternative teaching approaches; and promoting and using personalised learning. He then provides example uses of podcasts that correspond with specific teaching objectives in the U.K. National Curriculum.

In the United States, the Office of Information Technology (2006) of the University of Minnesota contends that podcasting involves a shift from e-learning to mobile learning, as podcasting is a time-shifting technology. They propose the following possible uses of podcasting in education:

- news/updates;
- guest lectures;
- student presentations;
- student-produced podcasts;
- interviews with guest experts;
- tours/fieldwork;
- internships/residencies;
- feedback/evaluation of student work;
supplementary material such as speeches, music, or other audio recordings; and
short language lessons, or other lessons that help students developing listening and speaking skills.

The last item on the list is worth noting. Many writers have pointed out the huge benefits that podcasting can offer language education, especially with regard to developing learners’ listening and speaking skills (Stanley, 2006; Pun, 2006). This paper deals with the application of podcasting in teaching English as a second/foreign language. It begins with an introduction to podcasting. This will be kept brief as readers who are interested in the technical aspects of podcasting can refer to such articles that are now available (e.g., Borja, 2005; Campbell, 2005). The paper will then proceed to the ELT (English Language Teaching) podcasting proper. This will cover (a) how to locate ELT podcasts, (b) the content and use of ELT podcasts available on the Web, and (c) the educational benefits of teacher podcasts and student podcasts. The last part of the paper will suggest suitable speaking activities for student podcasts, in particular radio drama and ELT rap.

What is Podcasting?

What are podcasts?

Podcasts are audio (sometimes video) programmes on the Web which are usually updated at regular intervals. New episodes can be listened to on the computer, or downloaded to an MP3 player or iPod for later listening. Although audio programmes have existed on the Web for a few years already, what makes podcasting unique is its capacity for “subscription”: through an RSS feed, listeners can “subscribe” to their favourite podcasts. Their computer will then receive “alerts” when new episodes have been posted. Podcatcher software, such as iTunes, will even download the latest episodes automatically once the programme is opened. In other words, instead of having to visit individual websites regularly for updated episodes, listeners will now have the latest episodes of their favourite programmes delivered to their computer.

Types of Podcasts

Podcasts available on the Web fall broadly into two types: “radio podcasts” and “independent podcasts”. Radio podcasts are existing radio programmes turned into podcasts, such as those produced by BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation) and
RTHK (Radio Television Hong Kong). “Independent podcasts” are Web-based podcasts produced by individuals and organizations.

It is the second type which has huge potential for ELT because they can be tailor-made to suit different learner needs. Also, they can be created by learners themselves with utmost ease, thanks to the advent in recent years of MP3 sound file format, and free and user-friendly sound recording and editing software such as Audacity, and to MP3 players and increasing the iPod becoming an electronic gadget owned by every teenager.

**ELT Podcasting**

**ELT podcasts: Where to find them.**

The first podcasts appeared in early 2005. ELT educators soon joined the movement, and since the second half of 2005, there has been an upsurge in the number of ELT podcasts on the Web. Teachers have 3 ways to look for suitable ELT podcasts for their students. They can start with “general” podcast directories. A podcast directory is a searchable database which is linked to sites that house podcasts. Teachers can type in a search term like “English”, “ELT”, “ESL”, and “TESOL”, and they will be given a list of ELT podcasts. An example of a general podcast directory is [http://www.podcastalley.com/](http://www.podcastalley.com/)

To narrow down their search, teachers may go directly to directories of educational podcasts. One well known educational podcast directory is Educational Podcasting Network: [http://epnweb.org/](http://epnweb.org/). A recent new directory is [http://recap.ltd.uk/podcasting/](http://recap.ltd.uk/podcasting/), which claims to be the first UK directory of educational podcasts.

There are now such an abundance of ELT podcasts on the Web that ELT podcast directories are also available. These are directories which cover ELT podcasts only. One example is [http://iteslj.org/links/ESL/Listening/Podcasts/](http://iteslj.org/links/ESL/Listening/Podcasts/) maintained by the Internet TESL Journal.

**Content of ELT Podcasts**

A brief survey of ELT podcasts reveals the following content types:
Comprehensive, e.g., www.englishteacherjohn.com/podcast/

These are podcasts that cover a wide range of content types, such as traditional listening comprehension activities, interviews, and vocabulary. A well-known ‘comprehensive’ podcast is the one quoted above, created by “Teacher John” who is teaching ESL in Japan.

Whole lessons, e.g., http://www.breakingnewsenglish.com/

These are whole lessons based on a podcast. The podcast quoted above, for example, makes use of a news story in each episode. The text of the news story is provided, accompanied by the audio file. There is then a lesson plan with accompanying worksheet materials. So, these are ready-made lessons based on podcasts which teachers can use in the classroom immediately.

Vocabulary, idioms, etc., e.g., http://newyorkenglish.net/

This is a popular type of podcast, probably because it is easy to produce. In this kind of podcast, the host chooses some vocabulary items and explains their usage. The example above concentrates on the special vocabulary used by New Yorkers.

Conversations with script, e.g., http://www.e-poche.net/conversations/

These podcasts contain conversations between native speakers. To help less proficient learners, each episode is accompanied by the script, for learners to refer to while listening to the conversation.


These are podcasts containing jokes and because they usually play on language they encourage careful listening by the learner.

Songs, e.g., http://englishpodsong.blogspot.com/

These podcasts contain songs for ESL learners. The songs are either traditional children’s songs, or authentic popular songs for teenagers. They are also often accompanied by the text of the lyrics.

Phonetics, pronunciation, e.g., http://phoneticpodcast.com/

Podcasts are obviously highly suited for teaching phonetics and pronunciation. These podcasts are lessons which focus on specific phonemes and pronunciation problems in English.

Stories: http://www.englishthroughstories.com/
These are usually story read-alouds. They may or may not be followed by listening comprehension questions.


These podcasts provide conventional listening comprehension practice.

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**Using ELT podcasts to enhance students’ listening skills**

Obviously, ELT podcasts can be used for intensive and extensive listening activities. There is, however, a strong case for using ELT podcasts for extensive listening, for the purpose of motivating student interest in listening to English, and providing them with exposure to native speakers’ speech (Rost, 1991). Stanley (2006) emphasizes that podcasts offer students a wide range of possibilities for extra listening both inside and outside of the classroom: “Supplementing the (often) scripted and stilted textbook listenings with the real life authentic conversations you can find on many podcasts is an attractive option for language teachers. These extracts can bring a range of different voices and varieties of English into the classroom” (p. 2). More advanced learners can be encouraged to listen to authentic podcasts. This activity effectively bridges the gap between the formal English which dominates most second language classrooms and the informal English used in most real-life communication events.

**Teacher and Student Podcasts**

In addition to using podcasts to provide their students with extra listening practice, teachers can also create their own podcasts or guide their students to produce theirs.

**Teacher Podcasts**

These are podcasts produced by teachers for their students. They allow the teacher to reach out to his/her students beyond the confines of the classroom. They can also supplement the teacher’s classes for different purposes. One example of a teacher podcast is [http://samantha.podomatic.com/](http://samantha.podomatic.com/). This example shows how a teacher in the UK uses podcasts to help her students prepare for GCES German.
Leach (2006) explains the benefits of using teacher podcasts for before-lesson and after-lesson listening:

What's more, it gives pupils who were in the classroom the chance to listen again to what the teacher said on a topic, to re-check those notes and make sure, as well as to make it easier for non-English native speakers to re-listen to a lesson without the distractions that may make instant translation difficult the first time around. A decent podcast can also mean that you can cover the basics without wasting classroom time. The simple delivery of the facts of a lesson in a podcast frees up the lesson itself for more detailed work - or, conversely, can provide the extra detail that takes some pupils off into other directions that a simple lesson can't contain.

**Student Podcasts**

These are podcasts produced by students (Adams, 2006; Ishizuka, 2005; Shaw, 2005). Many teachers have found this a very motivating activity (Leach & Monahan, 2006). A message submitted to a discussion list (TESLCA-L, City University of New York) by an ESL teacher in the United States testifies to this:

I have been having my students make their own podcasts lately (their writing assignment is to explain the process) and it has been going really well. Students are fascinated and highly motivated. They are working in heterogeneous groups, which requires they the use English to negotiate and plan and create.

Thanks to computer and information technology, it is now easy for students to produce their own podcasts. Teachers can follow the simple procedure below to help their students produce their podcasts:

- Start a blog that also hosts podcasts for the class, eg. [http://www.wordpress.com/](http://www.wordpress.com/); or
- Create an account for whole class with a free podcasting site, eg, [http://podomatic.com](http://podomatic.com)
- Have class share the same username and password.
- SS upload their mp3 files to class podcast on their own.
- Design activities that encourage SS to respond to each other.
Benefits of Student Podcasts

Producing podcasts is a motivating way for students to improve their speaking skills, as will be explained below. (See Appendix for examples of student podcasts.)

Motivation

Podcasts, once placed on the Web, can be accessed by anyone in the world. This means that for students producing their own podcasts, there is a real audience out there. This is a huge motivating factor. One example of a student podcast is the one produced by Secondary One students at Secondary School attached to Fudan University in China. Students respond to a topic assigned by the teacher. As can be seen at the website (http://www.fdfz.cn/), the students responded enthusiastically to the task.

Perfection through practice and rehearsal

Students who produce a podcast will usually have to practise or rehearse their “show” first. In other words, they will be undergoing plenty of practice which, though probably repetitive, is welcomed by the students themselves.

Collaboration through group podcasts

Collaboration skills have become a key generic skill in the school curriculum in Hong Kong (CDC, 2001). Students can be invited to produce podcasts in groups. Through the process, they learn to collaborate with each other.

Attention to accuracy

A podcast is a permanent record of oral performance. Being aware of that, students producing a podcast will pay more attention to their pronunciation accuracy.

Mixed-ability teaching

Different tasks can be assigned for different students according to their ability level. Producing podcasts, hence, provide every student to produce something to their best.
Large-class teaching

It is usually difficult to teach speaking in a large class (Nolasco & Arthur, 1988). With podcasts, students can be asked to produce programmes in groups; or they can be asked to produce their own programmes individually at home. The teacher and their classmates can listen afterwards.

Less confident students

Speaking usually involves face-to-face performance. Less confident learners usually feel threatened when called upon to speak to an audience, even if it is a small one. They will benefit from producing a podcast since it is performing “behind the scenes”.

Inter-school Podcasting Projects

As mentioned above, the biggest motivating force behind podcasting is that it allows students to reach large audiences out there. To ensure that students’ work is being responded to, one potentially powerful activity is for teachers from different classes, schools, countries, etc., to organize joint projects that enable their students to communicate and respond to each other. The following appeal from a teacher from a discussion list for ELT podcasting illustrates the idea:

I've been experimenting with podcasting and my students have recorded some questions about food, culture, body language, geography, animals, sports, habits, religion. The initial idea was to interview students in any English speaking country, but we are open to anyone interested in participating. We'll probably have some students in Australia (ESL), Argentina and Brazil involved. You can see the podcast here: http://mfr.podomatic.com/ Any help would be appreciated, thanks!

This kind of inter-school podcasting project provides an authentic purpose for communicating and producing the podcast. It incorporates real content matter that students are either familiar with or wish to know more about. With the technology now available, organizing such inter-school projects can be done with utmost ease.
Speaking Activities for Student Podcasts

Basically, any speaking activity used in ELT can be used for producing student podcasts. The following is a suggested list of such activities:

• Reading aloud
• SS give their thoughts on topic assigned by teacher
• SS listen to classmates’ thoughts and respond
• Oral Diary; oral weekly report
• Group presentations on a completed project
• Oral book report
• Picture description
• Story telling
• Chained story telling
• Agony Aunt: giving advice
• Creating riddles
• Role play
• Debates
• Dramatic monologues
• Radio Drama
• Jazz chants
• ELT rap

The final part of this paper will illustrate the application of podcasting with two types of speaking activities: radio drama and ELT rap.

Radio drama

The contribution that radio drama can make in developing students’ speaking skills, especially with regard to pronunciation and intonation, has been well recognized. (Stanley, 2006), for example, has included radio drama in his three suggested types of activities for student podcasts, the other two being speech work and classroom discussions.

Producing radio plays is of course not a new activity in ELT. But with rapid advances in information technology in recent years, a strong case can now be made for either reviving radio drama as an extra-curricular activity, or re-introducing it into the school-based English Language programme. First, recordings can now be made easily
on the computer or using an MP3 player/recorder, instead of on cassette tape. Hence, other than the hardware, the recordings literally cost nothing, and they can be copied, erased, and circulated at the touch of a button. Second, free and user-friendly audio editing software such as Audacity turns post-recording editing in a fun task. Digital sound effect clips, which can be found on commercially produced CDs or for free on the Web, can be inserted into the recordings easily. Third, the advent of podcasting means that a play produced can now reach thousands of real listeners out there, and this is a colossal motivator for students producing a radio play.

Educationally, radio drama production has many benefits for students. It develops students collaborative skills since production involves group work (Schuchat, 2005). It is a flexible group activity in that, by modifying the script, any number of students can take part in a radio play. By modifying the script, the teacher can also organize radio drama activities to cater for mixed ability groups and/or classes.

**ELT Rap**

ELT rap, as the name implies, is rap adapted or written for ELT purposes.

The linguist Geneva Smitherman has highlighted eight features of signification in rap lyrics:

1. Indirection, circumlocution
2. Metaphorical-imagistic
3. Humorous, ironic
4. Rhythmic fluence and sound
5. Teachy but not preachy
6. Directed at person or persons usually present in the situational context
7. Punning, play on words
8. Introduction of the semantically or logically unexpected

(cited in Perry, 2004, p. 62)

A glance at the list will show that when adapted, rap has great potential in English Language teaching. The rhythmic nature of rap lyrics facilitates the acquisition of the stress-timed rhythm of English. This has special significance in Hong Kong since the majority of learners in Hong Kong speak Cantonese, a syllable-timed dialect, as their mother-tongue. The play on words provides fun for students when they repeat raps for practice. The rhyming nature of rap lyrics will also heighten learners’ phonological awareness.
In ELT, jazz chants (Graham, 1978, 1996) have been one of the activities advocated for improving learners’ pronunciation, especially in terms of rhythm and intonation (Richard-Amato, 1988). ELT rap differ from jazz chants in that it has a musical dimension: the rhythm is provided by music in the background. This popular, musical, dimension will make ELT rap specially appealing to teenage students.

On top of the fun element, what will also attract teenage students to ELT rap is its content: rap is a channel for (young) people to speak out, to unload their personal worries and frustrations, and to critique scenarios of social injustice. In Hong Kong, students from working class families, who are often disadvantaged under the present competitive education system, will find ELT rap an opportunity to reconcile their mixed feelings about English: on the one hand they understand the importance of English to their future; on the other hand they resent the sense of failure brought by their inability to master a foreign language which has been imposed on them. (Lin, to appear) has put this succinctly:

Yet, for the majority of working class children in Hong Kong, English remains something beyond their reach. Unlike their middle-class counterparts, they typically live in a lifeworld where few will (and can) speak or use English for any authentic communicative or sociocultural purposes. To most of them, English is little more than a difficult and boring school subject which, nonetheless, will have important consequences on their life chances. Many of them have an ambivalent, want-hate relationship with English. While they accept the socioeconomic fact that English is very important for their future prospects, they also readily believe that they are no good in English.

In summary, ELT raps will appeal to teenage students because first, they represent an enjoyable activity for practicing English rhythm and intonation and developing phonological awareness, and second, they enable them to give expression to their thoughts and feelings about the society they live in. As mentioned above, with the technologies now available, they can either perform ELT raps before an audience and have their performance recorded, or work on a computer and, using sound editing software like Audacity, experiment with different ways to combine lyrics with music. With podcasting, they can then reach out to many teenage audiences.

Conclusion

Podcasting as a new technology has huge potential in enhancing L2 learners’ listening
and speaking skills (Stanley, 2005). Coupled with the ease of producing MP3 files, availability of free recording and editing software such as Audacity, and the fact that MP3 players and iPods are owned by the majority of teenagers, podcasts can be easily created. Their ability to reach large audiences in their own location and different parts of the world is an enormous motivator for students to produce their own podcasts. With imagination, teachers will be able to make the best use of this new technology for developing their students’ listening and speaking skills.

References


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