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IMPROVING STUDENTS' LISTENING SKILLS THROUGH PODCASTS

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Abstract

Listening to information that has been recorded – or stored in a similar way – can sometimes be difficult. And it is also complicated to see students interested in what they are listening to. A good way to help learners get engaged in this type of activities is by letting them decide what to listen to and – to a more extensive view – when, since they are always more attracted to things they like.

Podcasts offer such a possibility, given the fact that they are available for any person that has got a smart phone and access to an Internet connexion. The range of topics that can be discussed by listening to podcasts is quite large, and one of the best things about them is the fact they put forward real world language from all around the globe, becoming authentic, up-to-date material. By being exposed to this type of resources, students will definitely improve their listening skills.

Resumen

Escuchar información que ha sido grabada – o almacenada de manera similar – puede ser en ocasiones difícil. Y es también complicado lograr que los estudiantes se interesen en lo que están escuchando. Una buena forma de ayudar a estos oyentes a que se conecten a este tipo de actividades es dejándolos decidir qué escuchar – y de modo más amplio – cuándo, ya que siempre están más atraídos por las cosas que les gustan.

Los podcasts ofrecen tal posibilidad dado el hecho de que se encuentran disponibles para cualquier persona que tenga un teléfono móvil inteligente y acceso a una conexión a Internet. La gama de temas que pueden ser discutidos al escuchar podcasts es bastante amplia, y una de sus características es el hecho de que brindan lenguaje real de alrededor de todo el mundo, convirtiéndose en material auténtico y actual. Al ser expuestos a este tipo de recursos los estudiantes definitivamente mejorarán su comprensión auditiva.

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Introduction

Sometimes it is quite difficult to have students get the gist (general idea) when reading a text, but it is even more difficult to have them get - and understand - it when they listen to information that has been recorded. Moreover, it tends to be a real problem to see students truly interested in what they are listening to. What should be done, then, to help students improve their listening ability?

One good way to facilitate learners do so is by letting them decide what to listen to and – to a more extensive view – when. As with reading, students are always more attracted to things they like and in this case, they could be asked to write a list of those topics which they are interested in. Then, along with their classmates, they can choose from a varied list which will 'suit different tastes'. When a decision on the topics is made, the challenge for both the teacher and students comes. Finding articles on all imaginable areas is not as hard nowadays that the Internet is there to help. Of course this is the tough – yet enjoyable – part of the task. Having all of them involved and encouraging them to look for and bring them into the classroom is going to benefit everybody.

The means and ways to get that song they like, that Obama's speech or even that Simpsons' episode is just part of the whole thing. The idea is to make it as fun as possible. Podcasts are one good way through which they can find

what they are looking for. Just make sure they do not come up with things which might be offensive or a bit too explicit for some people.

Chapter I

1. An overview of the Use of Technology in ELT

1.1. Educational Technology

According to Mangal and Mangal (2009, 1), "...although education and technology have been in a continuous process of evolution... educational technology as a subject has its sole concern with the task of identifying the most suitable, appropriate and developed technology (both hardware and software) for serving the educational needs and purposes of the students and the society at a particular time and place."

Given this, we must pay careful attention to the idea of how useful technology has become in the field of education. About 20 years ago we would not have imagined a tool such as e-mails to be used as a way of sending and receiving, for example, homework that has to "travel" long distances in just seconds. As overhead projectors, TV sets, tape recorders, and other resources were used, the combination of every time more sophisticated software (e.g. Microsoft Office ©) and advanced gadgets (desktop and laptop computers, projectors, SMART Boards ©...) set them aside and started a revolutionary change in the way teachers develop their lessons and also in the way students interact in such lessons. Nowadays, there is even no need to be physically present in a classroom. Distance learning has become a

boom in education in more recent years, and this is of course the best evidence of how technology has turned into a key feature in education.

1.2. Technology and Language Teaching

As it has been made clear, at present technology and education cannot work separately. In his article *The Use of Computer Technology in Experimental Studies of Second Language Acquisition: A Survey of some Techniques and some Ongoing Studies* (2000, pp. 32 – 43), Jan H. Hulstijn establishes that “in the area of language teaching, electronic multimedia – hardware and software – has replaced the traditional audio and video systems in the language laboratory.” And this last fact is not limited to a laboratory. An important detail that has made technology easier to use is its portability. For example, a laptop and a projector can be taken into a classroom without difficulty, to mention just a couple of those gadgets which are now handy and part of most teachers and students’ everyday activities.

1.2.1. e-Learning

This project focuses on the use of podcasts as a way for students to improve their listening abilities. To be able to understand how they work, and the advantages they can provide tutors and students with, it is important to first understand what “mobile education” or e-Learning is.

Sandars (2006, 1) states that “essentially e-learning is distance, or distributed, education”. Based on this last statement we have to think of the multiple ways of distributing that education. The Internet has made it possible to have access to any type of information, all around the world and faster than any person would imagine. As this global net of data has evolved, so have a number of applications such as e-mail, video sharing and conferences, blogs, wikis, and of course, podcasts. And Sandars adds that “educators and learners (now) rely on sophisticated technology”, which is why language teachers could simply not stay away from this advances.

1.2.2. Advantages and disadvantages of e-Learning

Although the relationship between technology and education cannot be misplaced, teachers and students have to be aware of the fact that relying solely on technology is not an appropriate practice. There will always be benefits and downsides when using technology and the tools that have been developed based on it.

1.2.2.1. Advantages

For authors like Sandars, one of the most important advantages of the use of technology is the fact that the resources that are created and used as course material can be easily updated. If a new tool is created – or improved – it can be adapted and modified in such a way that allows participation of both tutors and learners. This last thing is vital when talking about the right distribution of

work for both parties: teachers as a guide, and students being active participants of the teaching – learning process.

In addition, the use of these resources provides the class with a variety of topics to be considered for use in their lessons. As a result, classes become livelier, more practical, and interaction produces real-world outcomes when it comes to language learning due to the use of authentic materials.

Last, but not least, there are still some teachers who do not find it easy to adapt themselves to the use of technology in the classroom, which is why they use the methodologies and resources that they are familiar with, mixed with the new ones. This is called “blended learning”.

1.2.2.2. Disadvantages

Communication can sometimes be difficult. In fact, it can turn into a really hard task because of aspects such as cultural gaps. Hence, this can be one of those complex issues when implementing technology in the context of language learning. Cyberculture – which has to do with how every culture uses technology and the tools which they have handy – might be a problem when choosing material that may seem suitable for a group of students in terms of level, but a bit too odd when it comes to contents. That is why the idea of more global tools needs to be considered when creating resources and making them available not only for the group of students who teachers work with at a certain time, but for people all around the globe.

Not only should the issue of “learning” how to correctly implement and use technology according to cultural awareness be considered, but also how much we should use it. Unluckily, more than a headache has been caused to both teachers and students who have become too dependent on technology. Far too many of them waste time which they could dedicate to finish other activities that are directly linked to their teaching or learning, respectively.

Kern, Ware, and Warschauer (2004) also take into account an interesting aspect which causes big arguments: the use of information which is available, but that is protected under copyright/intellectual property. This would not be a big problem if all the users made the sources of the information and resources (images, attachments, audio, etc.) they use clear, but this is something which does not really happen, especially in countries where the “copy-paste” practice is an everyday thing. This leads to plagiarism, which is banned according to law and ethics.

Technology has become a core element in today’s educational context and it would be impossible not to resort to it. As new generations start school, they seem to deal with technology in such a way that some of them do not even need a manual to handle all the new gadgets and resources that are now available. And it is because of this fact that teachers must find the most suitable ways to help their students enjoy and become more engaged in their lessons so that better results are seen at the end of a process. Nevertheless, this use of technology must be well balanced in order to avoid students and teachers becoming addicted to it.

Chapter II

2. Podcasts

The uses and applications of technology in the classroom are quite varied and there is a constant will for making them more user-friendly, and adapting them to the needs of both teachers and students. If we talk about technology in the classroom, another thing that has to be considered is students' likes and dislikes since they are – in most cases – years ahead when it comes to using it. It is then when teachers should – and ultimately, must – become more aware of all the advances and improvements in the area of educational technology and be ready to use them.

2.1. Definition of Podcasts

Essentially, a podcast is an audio file that is available from the Internet and anybody who has access to a connexion can download it. On its website, Apple Inc., one of the pioneers when it comes to the use and creation of podcasts and related technology, offers the following explanation:

A podcast is an episodic program delivered via the Internet using an XML protocol called RSS. Podcast episodes can be audio files, video files, documents, or any combination of the three. The publisher or broadcaster podcasts the program by posting the episodes and the XML document to a Web server. The consumer subscribes to the podcast using a client

application, such as iTunes, which regularly reads the XML file and downloads new episodes.

2.1.1. So what does RSS stand for?

RSS stands for Really Simple Syndication, which according to Wittenbrink (2005, 39) is a way of storing and sharing information on the web. He also explains that RSS and Atom are formats for messages and other information that is updated frequently. The documents that are written in these formats are called “newsfeeds” or “feeds”. In this case, those feeds become the so called podcasts that students and teachers are expected to use.

2.2. Using Podcasts

The aim of a podcast is to broadcast any type of information that can be turned into an RSS file, so that its users can find a television or radio programme, lecture, speech... just by looking for it in a list and then downloading it on a computer and next, on a portable audio device, for example, an MP3 player, an iPod or any smart phone that is able to reproduce such files.

Speaking about language learning, Apple Inc. offers this interesting view: Language courses, for example, can combine video for a sense of the foreign country, audio for information and ear training, and documents for practice and reference.

2.2.1. **Getting started**

So, how can students – and teachers – start using podcasts? First, users have to subscribe to a feed using the appropriate programme. According to Beare (2003), the most popular of these programmes, and possibly most useful, is iTunes. Then, they choose the topic(s) for which they would like to receive the feeds when they are available.

Finally, what makes podcasts (more) attractive to use? Following there are some of the best reasons:

- a. Podcasts are free.
- b. There are thousands of podcasts available from all over the world.
- c. New podcast episodes appear automatically and can be enjoyed anywhere, and at anytime.

2.3. **Podcasts in ELT**

King and Gura (2009, 147) state that “because podcasting is a recorded word product, it has obvious connections to language instruction... and it can facilitate learning in areas that are often not given much attention – speaking and listening.”

When it comes to listening, most learners go through what we could call stages. At first, they may experiment a feeling of anxiety, due to the fact that

the topic they are listening to might be new for them, or in some cases, too difficult for their level. When listening a second time, they will pay attention to more detailed information, trying to get only those bits which are necessary to understand the gist. The following times will offer them opportunities for confirming, and that initial nervousness will have disappeared. Then, using podcasts can turn into a practice which is harmless – using their own MP3 players anywhere, anytime they want – and that gives students a chance to listen to files as many times as they want.

As most language teachers know, the more students are exposed to (a) language, and the more natural (or real) that language is, the better they will develop their skills.

If the use of podcasts among learners develops into a regular practice – being optimistic, as much as they listen to their favourite music – instructors can be sure that their students will improve their listening a lot and this improvement will also lead them to becoming better speakers, readers, and writers of a the target language.

2.3.1. Advantages and disadvantages of Podcasting

Once again, teachers must focus their attention on the idea that any resource they are given to apply in the classroom is an aid to their teaching practice. And as with most of those aids, it is important to talk about their good and bad points.

2.3.1.1. Advantages

One of the advantages of using podcasts is that most students – even those who are not “close friends” with technology – are familiar with the use of recorded material and the technology necessary to correctly play them.

And, as it has been mentioned earlier, podcasts come along with the idea of portability: they are easy to store, and the devices they are stored in are easy to carry and handle. Mostly, podcasts come in the form of an MP3 file, which means they can be played on almost any state-of-the-art gadget.

2.3.1.2. Disadvantages

On the other hand, what may seem a great tool, can also turn into a big headache. Because of the format in which they are stored, podcasts can be too long, in terms of time. This might be discouraging for the listener, who essentially expects to have an opportunity to really enjoy the task.

Finally, the quality of the files cannot be guaranteed. Not all the creators of podcasts use the best programmes to edit or convert their files into a podcast, which means that there could be problems when reproducing them, such as poor sound.

Podcasts represent a really interesting tool for both students and teachers. If implemented properly, with a clear objective and the correct guidance, they

can be used in order to develop students' listening abilities and help improve their speaking as well. Choosing topics that suit different likes is not that difficult and making students part of this process will always make classes more interactive and eventually, they will be more responsible of their own learning.

Chapter III

3. Limitations in the use of technology: Do students rely too much on it?

“[The] Technology itself is not transformative. It’s the school, the pedagogy, that is transformative.”

Tanya Byron

This final chapter will explain, as much as possible, why teachers and especially students must not become dependent on technology. As Tanya Byron makes clear, technology on its own cannot change. We have to admit that there is always an ignition point, a trigger, that makes technology evolve, and it all depends on the needs of mankind.

Technology has definitely made our lives easier, but at the same time, for far too many people – especially young – it would be impossible to live in a world without all the technological devices and applications that have been developed throughout history. Is this a sign of how much everybody has become reliant on it?

As Cash and Heacox (2010, 12) point out “it may have caused our students to become intellectually lazy or unimaginative.” And here we have to talk not only about the Internet, as a source of limitless information. Even the use of a

calculator could be considered addictive making us wonder if technology is really of help or not.

To talk about them, some people have called this present generation – the ones born at the very end of the 20th century – the “click” generation. This term was fashioned due to the fact that for most teenagers and those who are in their twenties, everything is possible as long as they have access to a computer (or mobile phone) and it comes along with an Internet connexion. But they are not completely right.

First of all, out of the whole of information that has been made public on the web, only a limited amount is accurate. In other words, not everything that students have handy and believe to be true is actually true. The other percentage constitutes a misleading source of errors and outdated data. Teachers – and parents – should be aware of this, so that they could guide learners to distinguish between real information and that which must not be looked at.

As Nelson (2008, 80) makes clear, we must work to avoid the following:

- a. Students believing that anything from a computer is better than anything that comes from a book.
- b. Viewing the library as a last resort, and
- c. Students being concerned more with the quantity than the quality of their resources.

It is not strange to see learners concentrating on copying and pasting the very first information that they find on the net, without even checking for any data inaccuracy or even spelling mistakes. For so many of them, the idea of having to hold a book in their hands has become rather unbelievable, and this is another issue which has to be paid attention to. Technology does not aim at replacing resources which have proved to be useful and consistent. There is an important need for having students look for different sources of information, no matter if they have been published on the Internet, or if they are contained in a book, or any other means of distribution. What counts is making them become responsible, so that they could demonstrate that what they have decided to use for their school work is worthwhile.

3.1. Advantages and disadvantages of technology use

The following chart presents a list of some of the advantages and disadvantages of the use of technology in educational settings, based on what has been explained in previous paragraphs.

ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF TECHNOLOGY USE	
Advantages	Disadvantages
It helps students become more critical thinkers.	It might limit imagination.
Allows users to create material that meets their own needs.	Makes information sharing quite limited since it is not thought for a wide “target audience”.
Encourages verification of information and sources.	Increases impulsivity and reduces perseverance.
Motivates learners to become more responsible of their own learning.	Creates lonesome workers, who see in computer-human interaction a lifestyle.
Makes workers more effective, in terms of use of different technological resources.	Reinforces the idea of the “click” generation, by making tasks seem too easy to perform.

Adapted from Advancing Differentiation: Thinking and Learning for the 21st Century. Cash R. M., Heacox D., 2010.

The diverse uses and applications that people have found for technology have turned it into an everyday resource, which is quite difficult to set aside. Even though, students, teachers, and parents should learn how to best take advantage of it, remembering that it is not the only answer to the queries they may have. It is more than important to remember that technology is there for humans to use it, and not in the other way.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions

- It has been established that using podcasts as a (language) learning tool provides real advantages for the learning of English (and other languages), especially when it comes to improving learners' listening – and therefore – speaking skills.
- Not only students benefit themselves by using technology in the classroom – and outside it. Those teachers who are willing to improve their professional practice can make technology part of their lessons, without relying too much on it.
- Although present and future generations of learners use technology with ease, it will always be important to offer them the adequate guidance when it comes to use it correctly. There are tools that might end up being used to do something completely different from what they were originally designed for.
- The more students are exposed to up-to-date, authentic materials, the better their learning will be.

Recommendations

- When implementing and using tools such as podcasts it is necessary to make sure that the right equipment and devices are available, so that the

tasks can be carried out without difficulties and to meet the proposed objectives from the very beginning.

- Helping students become more independent and responsible of their own learning is not a very easy job, but by creating in them study habits they can understand how important it is to dedicate that extra percentage of effort to the different activities they have to complete.
- It is vital not to abuse of the use of technology. It does not only make people become too dependent on it, but it also makes them waste time that could be destined to complete other important duties.

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