

EDUCATIONAL PODCASTING

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Thomas Edison didn't exactly consider the phonograph a device for teaching language when he invented it in 1877. However, he did suggest that its ten possible future uses included "the teaching of elocution" and "the preservation of languages by exact reproduction of the manner of pronouncing."

He could hardly have imagined that a remote descendent of that device, the podcast, would one day offer such convenient, powerful potential for language learning and teaching.

Podcasting is a play on the words "iPod" and "broadcasting." Podcasts are essentially audio files that, for the most part, can be freely downloaded from the Internet and can be listened to on a computer or any portable playback device that supports MP3 files (Jordan, 2007).

Podcasts also provide great value for language teachers. Many excellent materials are available, and it is becoming progressively easier to use them in the classroom. It is hard to understate the importance of this media phenomenon for both learners and teachers. Why is this so?

Because listening is the single most important skill in language learning. The failure to promote listening activities in the classroom is a teaching flaw that even the best language instructors are often guilty of. In the past this was somewhat justifiable, because listening activities depended on clunky machines that were frequently unreliable. Moreover, finding appropriate listening materials was often difficult. Advancing technologies are changing that.

Listening is the language skill most used by the average person, and it is our major source of comprehensible input. Learners must hear and comprehend before they speak, so listening should be the first skill that you teach. This worries some teachers, but it shouldn't; aural activities can be intrinsically motivating.

You should teach this skill gradually and systematically. In a pure listening exercise, your students develop the skill in isolation from the other skills. For the most part, you do this by presenting your learners with the opportunity to hear a specific selection of authentic speech. This includes giving them additional opportunities to listen to the exact same thing several times.

Students must be explicitly taught to recognize the reduced language forms of colloquial speech. Presented with identical repetitions of a speech segment, they will learn to recognize the reduced vowels of **English**, for example. They will also gradually learn to dissect the structures in use, and the unfamiliar vocabulary. Also, part of aural comprehension is learning to decipher nonverbal clues – many of which are carried, for example, in the intonation of a speaker's voice. Listening activities can bring these intoned meanings to life.

We listen in different ways for different purposes, and this is an important consideration when we think about language teaching. For example, we should include among our listening activities a wide range of activities and materials. So says applied linguist David Nunan, who has provided an excellent set of rules for

effective listening practice.

Authentic Texts: He adds that our materials should be based on a wide range of authentic texts, including both monologues and dialogues. Add answering-machine messages, public transportation announcements, mini-lectures and narrative recounts.

Also, the content should be personalized. For example, have your students “listen to one side of a conversation and react with written responses.” You can find many other ways to get your students to respond personally to the material. You might take into account local culture or recent news, for example. If your students are young adults, don’t forget to provide them with a brief love story. From the beginning, learners should know what they are listening for and why.

Schema-building tasks should precede the listening – in other words, the teacher should introduce the listening activity proper with questions or a warm-up activity, for example, that wakes up the learner’s dormant sense of what the listening activity will involve. By creating a sense of anticipation, you can add more life to the lesson.

You should incorporate strategies for effective listening into the materials. If the speakers use “woulda,” “shoulda” and “whaddaya” a lot, introduce those structures and have your students practice them before listening begins. Of course, key vocabulary should be part of pre-listening preparation.

Give your learners opportunities to progressively structure their listening by listening to a text several times. Also, have them work through increasingly challenging listening tasks as the number of repetitions of the text progresses. For example, after the first listening, they may need to write down the main idea of the text. The second time out, they may need to answer written questions about specific details from the text. These activities enable them to probe progressively deeper into the text.

How do you use this stuff? Whatever the level of technological sophistication of your teaching environment, you have options. For one, download onto an MP3 player your edited podcast; ideally it should be one with a transcript for lesson planning. Take it to class with a small pair of portable MP3 speakers. Now, you are off and running.

A less elegant solution is to download your chosen podcast onto a laptop computer, bring the laptop into class and let it rip. Unfortunately, laptop computer volume is often inadequate for medium-sized classes and larger, so external speakers may again be necessary.

Your third choice is to burn your podcast onto a CD or download it onto a flash storage device. Almost everyone has access to a CD player; fewer have access to a system that can read from flash memory. With luck and perhaps an investment in technology, however, you should be able to use this basic option.

Whichever playback system works for you, just do it. If you choose good materials and develop good, sophisticated activities, listening practice makes learning and teaching even more fun.