

PODCASTS AND THEIR ROLE IN ESP WRITING

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Abstract: Traditional classroom learning has long been enriched by advances in information technology. Today, it is no longer necessary for a teacher and learner(s) to meet in a physical location at a scheduled time. Learning has shifted from a teacher-centred approach to a more personalised experience, embracing e-learning and blended approaches. Learners can access content and tailor their learning methods to suit their learning style, needs and interests, using digital devices at any convenient time and place. This article explores the use of podcasts as a digital learning tool in higher education, particularly in language learning. Moreover, the implementation of podcasts in developing writing skills among ESP students will be overviewed.

Key words: e-learning, English for specific purposes, tertiary level education, podcast, writing skills

1. INTRODUCTION

As a growing trend in formal education, blended learning approach integrates traditional in-school teaching and electronic learning (e-learning) approaches [1]. E-learning, is understood as “the delivery of a learning programme by electronic means” [6], such as personal computers (computer-assisted learning), or portable laptops, tablets, or smart phones (mobile-assisted learning). The learner can either participate in person, in an online class or access digital materials without time or location constraints. What is more, learning does not even require the teacher’s constant presence. Instead, the teacher is a facilitator of the learning process, helping the learner develop learning strategies and finding relevant learning materials in a suitable digital format, or simply creating and uploading them on a learning platform. By delegating some workload in a digital audio or visual format to the learner for homework, the teacher can better organise the subsequent face-to-face class for developing other skills. One of these digital formats that are gaining in popularity is podcast.

Coined from the two words, *iPod* and *broadcast*, podcast refers to any digital audio or video file (vodcast), or series of files, distributed over the internet for playback on mobile phones, laptops, tablets, or personal computers. With high-speed internet, podcasts are easily accessed, usually free of charge, through different platforms, such as streaming services, downloaded apps or web browsers. They are on demand at any given time for either bingeing or replaying the content. Podcasts are also immersive, allowing for the listener to engage with the content of personal interest, while connecting with a community of like-minded people through the podcast’s social media, forums and blogs [9]. With over 500 million listeners worldwide, most (86.1%) access podcasts via mobile phones [24] either for entertainment, relaxation, or to stay well-informed. However, predominantly, the reason for listening to podcasts, at least according to 74% of respondents in a USA survey, is to learn something new [29]. All this makes podcasts a useful informal learning tool and a potential addition to any formal educational setting.

2. PODCASTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

University students, being experienced learners, have unique styles and paces of learning, commitments, goals and motivation outside the learning context. They are self-directed in learning if they can relate it to their own needs and wants [16].

Podcast and podcasting—the practice of creating downloadable digital recordings of broadcasts—are recognised as a powerful learning and supplementary educational tool. They enhance teaching and learning, especially in hybrid learning approaches that blend classroom and online instructions, accommodating both synchronous and asynchronous models. Teachers can assign an open source podcast for learners to access or download on-demand for study or revision. Moreover, they can create podcasts tailored to course objectives or learners’ needs and interests, or even encourage learners to produce their own [23]. Podcasts and podcasting, thus, make learning processes more relevant and engaging and foster diverse, efficient, and personalized learning experiences.

Using podcasts in higher education transfers the learning process from the instructor to the student. Podcasts can serve as: (1) a primary learning material if given before face-to-face classes for the student to independently learn new concepts and theory (e.g., in a flipped classroom¹); (2) a duplicate of a classroom lecture, enabling

¹ Flipped classroom—the instructor shares the lesson content outside the classroom via technology, and thus, concept learning occurs out of class asynchronous and the classroom time is used for practice.

learners to revise and better understand the material covered in class; and (3) a supplementary tool for sharing additional information [20].

University instructors who upload their own podcasts—either as audio, video or slide shows with narration—for students to learn before class, can alter their classroom behaviour and use face-to-face lectures to engage students in discussions on issues raised by the podcast, reiterate key points, and conduct quizzes or additional activities [19].

Students use university-made podcasts to clarify and revise lecture material they had missed or attended previously [19]. They find them helpful, both for learning and reducing in-class anxieties. They appreciate the personalisation of the learning process and the possibility to control time and place of learning [10].

More recently, podcasts have been recognised as a tool to foster students’ motivation and engagement to further explore given themes in a more informal setting. Students are often prompted to search for resources or information mentioned in the podcast [9]. Moreover, show notes² may encourage deeper exploration, or participation in forum discussions.

Listening to podcasts can cater to various learning styles, such as auditory or solitary learners. Being primarily audio files, podcasts improve accessibility for students with vision impairments. Additionally, as most podcasts provide transcripts, students with hearing impairments or those who prefer to read while listening can benefit. [10, 26, 28].

3. LANGUAGE LEARNING PODCASTS

Language learning podcasts are commonly used to develop pronunciation, grammar, listening and speaking skills [32]. Their content provides exposure to natural pronunciation, correct usage of vocabulary, collocations, phrases or idioms, and enhances listening comprehension [14]. In subsequent classes, based on the podcast themes, learners can practice real-life conversations, express opinions and develop critical thinking and fluency through discussions, presentations or peer instructions [19].

If transcripts are provided, shadowing—tracking the speech they hear and vocalizing it while listening—can improve learners’ stress patterns, reading speed and positively affect listening, reading and speaking fluency [12, 34].

Some language learning podcasts are focused on writing processes, from researching, through drafting to proofreading. However, writing skills can be practiced while listening to any podcast, for example, by answering questions, completing sentences, questionnaires and quizzes, [10, 17], or writing summaries, reviews, and discursive essays related to the podcast content.

Language learning podcasts are usually seen as a welcome change in face time class structures as they shift learning to outside the formal setting, placing the learner at the centre. In mixed-ability classes, podcasts tailored to different language levels allow for personalised learning. Ultimately, using language learning podcasts motivates students to, hopefully, continue upgrading their language skills.

4. PODCASTS IN ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES

At non-philological higher education institutions, language courses are often designed to meet the specific needs of the field of studying. While general language teaching may still be present, the learning material is usually field-specific and although it may be abridged, it is often used in its authentic form. The relevant skills are taught within a hybrid learning approach and communicative learning takes place to develop the learner’s language competencies [22].

Although they are sometimes implemented in secondary school curriculums [27], English for specific purposes (ESP) courses are typically offered at tertiary level of education or to professionals, who are preferably experienced advanced language learners. ESP courses are “designed to meet specified needs of the learner” with the content materials related to a particular discipline, occupation and activities. They are based on lexical, semantic, syntactic, and discourse analysis within the discipline, but not necessarily focused on all language skills, and do not follow a per-determined methodology [15].

Podcasts have also been recognised in ESP classes as a language learning tool in both its subcategories: English for academic purposes (EAP) and English for occupational purposes (EOP), providing relevant concepts and language structures for academic study and research, and professional work, respectively. ESP podcasts foster learners’ autonomy as they: (1) host engaging well-informed experts in the learner’s field of interest, who are native or proficiency-level speakers; (2) are accessible to different types of learners and accommodate different learning styles; and (3) provide flexibility and convenience to allow for the learner’s commitments.

In ESP courses, podcasts and their transcripts and blog posts provide specified authentic language input that can be translated or whose grammar, lexis, syntax or discourse can be analysed [30]. Moreover, they can be used to

² Show notes—a written page about a podcast episode providing an overview of its content, and/or transcript, links to resources and call-to-actions (CTAs) that invite listeners to, for instance, watch a video, share personal experience, or read the blog [25].

practice the receptive and productive language skills.

However, choosing the most relevant, reliable and high-quality podcast can be time-consuming and challenging due to the vast array of available content [26] on any topic, current issue, or the latest advancement in any area of interest. Authenticity, objectivity, and purposefulness of the content should be the guidelines for decision making. In addition, teachers should assess the amount of specialised vocabulary, the lexical density and speech rate to accommodate the learner's language level [33]. The unfamiliar vocabulary and high-speed speech rate of the speakers can be intimidating for lower-level learners. To help them, teachers can pre-teach some vocabulary, assign only short chunks for listening, ask learners to replay the parts they find difficult, or adjust the playback speed if possible [8].

4.1 PODCASTS AND ESP WRITING

The use of ESP podcasts and podcasting in developing vocabulary, listening [21, 31], reading and speaking skills has been the subject of many studies [5, 6, 33]. However, there appear to be fewer studies on the potential implementation of podcasts in developing writing skills with ESP university learners.

Written text and writing are central in ESP courses as a means of learning and communicating with the academic or professional community. Writing serves to consolidate knowledge, express attitudes, arguments and present findings, or call for action. While formal and impersonal in style, with the introduction of multimedia and electronic technologies in everyday communication these conventions may seem alien to the learner [13].

Bamanger et al. [2] found a significant decrease in spelling, punctuation and capitalization errors after science students listened to a podcast designed to improve writing. However, the used podcast was for general English and not for specific language purposes. Studies also suggest that podcasts with exercises focused on key words and grammar structures can impact writing accuracy. In a flipped classroom, students were motivated to spend more time studying when they were asked to read the captions while watching an educational video. This resulted in students producing longer compositions and demonstrating improved proficiency in writing skills [18].

Suseno [30] explored how podcasts and paraphrasing tools can improve academic writing skills. By analysing the authentic language input (the podcast's transcript) students could become more aware of the use of the lexical and syntactic structures, sentence cohesion, punctuation, and grammatical constructions and principles, all of which were seen to improve in the students' written composition. Additionally, Chaikovski et al. [6] found that English for professional purposes podcasts, career coach podcasts, and instructional writing videos on a genre relevant for the profession helped engineering students improve their writing skills. [ibid.].

The most natural use of writing skills emerges when learners are engaged in creating their own podcasts, integrating both receptive and productive skills during the individual and collaborative processes. These include reading resource materials for the episodes, writing scripts, listening to peers discussing the content, or speaking to the podcast guests. Bella [3] used learner-created podcasting assignments in a research skills for undergraduate professional writers course. Students collaborated to define each podcast theme, 'sound, feel and goal'. While finding the right tone, style, resources, etc, the students were asked to produce various texts, including genre analysis, episode pitch, research plan, episode outline and annotated bibliography, blog-style reflections, episode snippets, transcript drafts, peer fact checking, and substantive editing [ibid.]. Despite initial resentment, anxiety, or dissatisfaction, students found the process immersive, enjoyable, and transformative, ultimately feeling proud of their final products [ibid.].

5. CONCLUSION

When designed as hybrid courses, in which face-to-face teaching and e-learning, are blended, the educational environment becomes more diverse, flexible, accessible, engaging, and motivating. English for specific purposes courses in higher education are readily embracing new technologies. Both podcasts for English language learning and educational occupation- or profession-related podcasts can be utilised in ESP classes, first to aid an individual learner to revise and/or improve their general language-related problem areas, the second to equip them with the terminology and language skills essential for their academic and professional careers.

ESP podcasts and podcasting can prompt a number of opportunities for writing from short summaries to longer discursive essays, in which learners can implement new terminology and language structures.

Finally, introducing podcasts as a tool of language learning can lead to acquiring strategies for autonomous self-motivated and self-directed learning that can be transferred to professional environment and support life-long learning, where written communication still matters.

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