



Podcast-Mediated Foreign Language Writing. A Case Study in L2 Academic Settings

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Abstract

This case study, as part of a larger survey, has been conducted on first-year university students learning a foreign/second language (L2). With an initial short questionnaire given to them at the beginning of the course, we wanted to detect what they considered most important in learning a L2. Our students wish to improve their communication skills and pronunciation, enrich their vocabulary in an alternative way and learn elements of the culture of the foreign language. For this reason, we have chosen to involve podcasts in our course, because they combine listening skills, analysis and evaluation of information, creative exchange of ideas in the L2, effective verbal communication, integrated speech, and experiential learning that increase the motivation to produce high-quality learning tasks, according to their interests [1]. Furthermore, podcasts favor the personalization of learning process, they are a stimulus to promote dynamic interaction [2], to enhance students' special ability to pronounce the L2, and therefore to bring about listening comprehension and the oral discourse. The same content can be taught in a variety of ways [3] inside and outside of the classroom, which helps the learning process. Moreover, podcasts are technological educational tools capable of increasing students' language skills and proficiency, as well as the likelihood that students will feel engaged and motivated [4]. From the various uses of podcasts, we chose in our case to use podcasts as a consolidation of the topics of the chapters that had been completed, as listening to authentic language to enrich speaking skills, vocabulary, pronunciation and as a trigger that will provoke reflection and written commentary on a specific topic and vocabulary, using the L2. Thus, the podcasts given to the university students were related to the lesson topic. The students listened to them and commented by writing in the L2. In a questionnaire we collected their perceptions of the pedagogical value of podcasts and their satisfaction with this educational tool. Our research prospect is to involve our students in creating their podcasts in the L2.

Keywords: *podcast, foreign language learning, authentic learning, L2 writing*

1. Introduction

The use of various technologies helps and conveys to the learners the authentic texts of any form, so that they are in constant contact with the foreign or second language (L2). Authentic ways of dealing with the L2 and alternative activities that dynamically involve learners, improve specific skills, and produce a positive attitude towards foreign culture and everyday issues. Both the maintenance of attention, the decoding of information and the subsequent written or oral expression of the learner are essential elements of those learning a L2 [1]. The value of listening to podcasts hides a complex cognitive activity that improves language proficiency, but also language comprehension [5], because it involves conscious and unconscious uses of strategies for the construction of meaning.

The original audio material produced by listening to podcasts can provide linguistic stimuli and enhance speaking ability in the L2, and thus bring about listening comprehension and speaking [6], [7], [8]. The playful, authentic character and immediacy of podcasts can help L2 learners to approach knowledge more directly, flexibly, more easily, to develop articulation skills, to express thoughts in writing or orally, to listen to different opinions [9], to decode the information and to maintain attention [10]. Learning becomes student-centered, active, using digital media and with texts that are not simply offered, but produced in an authentic way and favoring the critical thinking of the participants [1].

2. Podcasts in L2 education

With the innovative teaching resource of podcasts “the same content can be taught in a variety of ways and students can experience different types of learning methods” [3] inside and outside the



classroom. Many researches on the mediation of podcasts in L2 teaching have shown excellent results. The podcasts favor the personalization of learning, enrich the course content and are a stimulus to promote dynamic interaction [2]. Moreover, the podcasts are a strong motivator for active participation [11] and for better understanding and retention of interest [12]. They increase language skills and the likelihood that students feel engaged and motivated [4], thus, the learning becomes enjoyable [13], especially because of their authentic speech and opportunities for autonomy and independent learning [14]. Furthermore, oral speaking skills improve effective correction of pronunciation in the L2 [15], [16], vocabulary enrichment [7] and listening skills [17].

An audio podcast helps exposure to a variety of information and an authentic interaction with the L2 so that it can be mastered pleasantly, creatively, meaningfully, and successfully [1]. As an educational tool, it incorporates audio recordings of the target language, it brings about listening comprehension, a trigger for written and oral commentary, immediacy, effective and quality learning. Additionally, listening, observing, searching, interpreting, expressing through these educational tools support group actions or individually the needs of each learner [18]. Personal and communicative learning strategies and expression of opinions are favored with the innovative educational resource of podcasts in L2 education.

In this paper we will present a case study, as part of a larger survey, in which we included podcasts in our university course because they combine listening skills, evaluation of the information, and increase of motivation to produce high-quality written tasks in the L2, inside and outside the classroom.

3. Research Methodology

We conducted a case study on first-year university students learning a foreign language at the University of Athens- Department of Italian Language and Literature. The students who participated in our study were mainly women (N = 56) who represent 91,8% of our sample. After detecting students' expectations of what they considered most important in learning a L2, with an initial questionnaire, we were able to observe their preferences and we could organize our course. Their most popular choices were enriching their vocabulary in an alternative way (67.7%), learning the culture of the L2 (62.9%), improving their communication skills (50%), their writing (40.3%) and pronunciation (33.8%).

The models usually presented in L2 courses are written. Our intention was to make the change and use an oral presentation, where the emphasis is on narration and 'voice', with the aim of producing a written text. A creative and effective way of teaching and approaching the L2, which can involve all the above, is through podcasts.

Combining the requirements of our students and the international literature and research, we decided to involve audio podcasts in our university courses. For our research needs, we selected podcasts according to the subject matter of our courses. Moreover, we used them both to consolidate the topic of each chapter, as an opportunity to listen to authentic language, as well as to improve and enrich speaking skills, vocabulary, pronunciation and as a trigger for written commentary on the specific topic of the lesson. The students listened to various podcasts, inside or outside the classroom, and commented individually, writing in the L2 on their opinion about what they heard and related to the topic of the chapter they had been taught. These topics had to do with nutrition (alimentazione), relationships (relazioni), work (lavoro) and telework (tele-lavoro). In a questionnaire we collected their perceptions of the pedagogical value of podcasts and their satisfaction with this educational tool.

4. Research Results

A large percentage of our students (93.3%) already use various podcasts for educational purposes and all of them emphasize that these multimedia tools are easily accessible, useful for learning a subject, they motivate and facilitate learning. Furthermore, it appeared from the questionnaire that our students were satisfied with podcasts when learning the Italian language (46.7% strongly agree, 53.3% agree). They judged that the content of the podcasts was well organized (97.3%), the information they received from the podcasts was absolutely useful, and they were able to improve their pronunciation in the L2. They also felt that podcasts are a way to come into contact with authentic L2 material, to enrich vocabulary, and the personalized learning through podcasts can improve their communication skills. The written commentary on their podcasts seemed easy (60%) or of moderate difficulty (40%). In addition, podcasts were found to help improve writing as well as better understanding of course topics.

We also present the questionnaire designed to detect learners' beliefs about educational use of podcasts.



	Absolutely agree	Agree	Disagree	Absolutely disagree
Do you use podcasts for educational purposes				
Podcasts are easily accessible				
Podcasts are useful tools for learning a subject				
Podcasts can mobilize learning				
Podcasts make learning easier				
I am satisfied with the podcasts when teaching the Italian language				
The content of the podcasts was well organized				
The information I got from the podcasts was helpful				
Podcasts can improve my foreign language pronunciation				
Podcasts are a way for me to get in touch with authentic foreign language material				
Podcasts can enrich my vocabulary				
Personalized learning through podcasts can improve my communication skills				
Podcasts contribute in improving my writing				
The podcasts helped me to understand better the course topics (lavoro, tele-lavoro, alimentazione, relazioni)				
	was difficult	was of moderate difficulty		was easy
The written commentary of the podcasts				

Briefly describing their experience of commenting on podcasts, the students mentioned:

“Through the observation of the podcasts I “came” in better contact with the language and especially with words and expressions used in spoken language.”

“The podcasts were useful for learning the language in terms of the vocabulary of the subject units and were interesting.”

“The whole material was accessible and very helpful. I think I spent my time constructively when I listened to them.”

“Commenting on podcasts has helped me improve my vocabulary and pronunciation.”

“Very helpful in choosing words and expressions. The contact with the language, compared to other times where this was clearly more limited.”

“It was a helpful experience for the course, thanks for engaging properly and we had a lot of choices.”



5. Conclusions

Podcasts can promote creative exchange of ideas in the L2, can combine listening skills, analysis, and evaluation of information, offer effective verbal communication, integrated speech, and experiential learning, so that motivation to produce high-quality learning tasks is increased. The use of podcasts in L2 teaching can offer mobilization [1], [10], language comprehension [19], improvement in reading, comprehension of texts [8], listening ability [6] and verbal ability [20]. Podcasts present an authentic, non-traditional model of storytelling for students that encourages creativity, as the spoken format can elicit more engagement than a written sample given during class and a sense of confidence in applying this format to their own writing. The use of both written and spoken materials reinforces the ways in which content and presentation intertwine when people share experiences [21].

We contributed to research and international literature. In this case study we had a very positive integration of podcasts in L2 teaching, as the auditory-oral stimulus improved writing skills and enhanced vocabulary richness and L2 comprehension. While this task is at its core a writing activity, our research prospect is to involve our students in creating L2 podcasts, so to engage also speaking skills.

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