

The Esepod Project: Improving Listening Skills Through Mobile Learning

Beatriz Cortina Pérez, Miguel Ángel Gallardo Vigil, Dimitrinka Georgíeva Níkleva, M^a Ángeles Jiménez Jiménez, María Teresa López-Mezquita Molina, Francisco F. del Pino Morales, Lorena Sanchidrián Rodríguez

University of Granada (Spain)

bcortina@ugr.es

Abstract

In the current century learning models are changing very quickly, particularly due to the unceasing development of ICTs. Not only the amount of information currently available is massive thanks to the Internet, but also channels of accessing this knowledge have developed immensely to the point that anyone can be connected to the web at any time and at any place. This revolution has been bloomed by the promotion of iPhones, Blackberries and Androids in the last five years. Within this context, and particularly with adult learners, new teaching and learning methodologies are flourishing in order to take advantage of m-learning.

This paper describes the ESEPOD project -Extensive Spoken English through Podcasting- focused on improving EFL spoken skills using m-learning. We will first examine the main literature on mobile learning in relation to EFL. We will detail the advantages and disadvantages of m-learning and we will analyse different available mobile resources to improve spoken skills. Then, we will describe the ESEPOD project carried out at the University of Granada (Spain) with students from the Faculty of Education. We will discuss data recorded from participants. Finally, we will get to the conclusions and to the immediate future of the ESEPOD project.

1. Introduction

The fact that the 21st century society is becoming mobile is palpable. More and more frequently, we use mobile devices for working outside the office, personal communication, entertainment, and also, learning. Being part of our lives, mobile learning needs to find its place within Education; we need to expand the notion of e-learning that has recently transformed the traditional school, and move towards a different scheme of learning that lays the majority of teaching/learning responsibility on the students, who can access learning bits outside the walls of the school. The pretext for this transformation is to be found in today's human behaviour; as Sharples, Taylor, and Vavoula [1] put it:

We learn across time, by revisiting knowledge that was gained earlier in a different context, and more broadly, through ideas and strategies gained in early years providing a framework for a lifetime of learning. We move from topic to topic, managing a range of personal learning projects, rather than following a single curriculum. (p.3)

In terms of EFL, this new conceptualisation of learning is particularly interesting as the number of hours devoted to FL instruction has been proved not to be enough for the skilful development of the language (Cortina, 2011 [2]; Jiménez, 2004 [3]; Salvadores, 2009 [4]). Furthermore, each learner improves his/her communicative competence at different pace and mobile devices give the possibility of personalising the learning process. These advantages have flourished the recent research and

application of mobile devices into the language learning process, known as MALL -Mobile Assisted Language Learning.

As part of technology enhanced learning, MALL enjoys from the advantages of using technology for learning, such as increase of students' motivation, enhancement of interactivity, and the use of multimedia resources and hyperlinks. Nevertheless, it presents some peculiarities compared to the more extended CALL-Computer Assisted Language Learning-:

- MALL is frequently characterised as informal, i.e., not integrated in the curricula.
- MALL is organised in small bits of learning with modular structure.
- MALL is spontaneous and instantaneous; one can access the learning bits at any point and at any moment.
- MALL is portable, so it follows the learner.
- MALL devices do not usually enjoy from broad-band connection.

In sum, "A computer is better than a mobile phone for handling various types of information such as visual, sound, and textual information, but mobile phone is superior to a computer in portability. And some students don't have their own computer" (Yamaguchi, 2005, p. 57) [5]. Therefore we find that traditional e-learning has its own advantages compared to mobile learning, but there is something e-learning cannot surpass M-learning, i.e., mobile devices are ever-present and ubiquitous; consequently, they are already integrated in our daily life and we do not have to train learners on them, because they already use them. Furthermore, and as Traxler (2007, p.4) [6] states, "Many of the virtues of e-Learning are the virtues of the power of its technology (and the investment in it) and soon these virtues will also be accessible to mobile devices as market forces drive improvements in interface design, processor speed, battery life, and connectivity bandwidth."

2. The ESEPOD Project

The ESEPOD Project – Extensive Spoken English through Podcasting- (<http://www.ugr.es/~innopod/>) emerged from the necessity of improving university students' speaking skills. After some research carried out on the level of development of EFL communicative skills of University students at the Faculty of Education of the University of Granada in Ceuta [2, 4] and Melilla [3], we concluded that both listening and speaking were the skills in which learners' performance was the most limited, as well as the ones in which the learners feel less comfortable according to their self-evaluation.

Given these results and due to the impossibility of increasing spoken English instruction hours within their university degrees, we designed the ESEPOD project. The main aim of the project is using podcast as an extensive listening resource in order to improve students listening skills, in particular, and communicative competence in general.

2.1. Extensive listening and podcasting

Traditionally, skills have been developed in class through intensive activities; only reading has enjoyed the possibility of being developed extensively through the well-known "reading for pleasure". Even though the benefits of this activity have been proved to be numerous, there is no tendency in ELT to use extensive listening, or listening for pleasure, with the same purpose. By extensive listening, we understand "All types of activities that allow learners to receive a lot of comprehensible and enjoyable listening input" (Renandya & Farrell, 2010, p.56) [7]. Traditionally, the lack of authentic extensive oral input has hindered the popularisation of extensive listening. However, the advent of Internet has overcome these limitations, particularly thanks to the proliferation of podcast.

According to the New Oxford American Dictionary, a podcast is "a digital recording of a radio broadcast or similar program, made available on the Internet for downloading to a personal audio

player" [8]. The most important and distinctive feature of podcast is syndication. When we talk about podcast we are not referring to a single audio or video file but to a periodical downloading of episodes of a particular podcast, therefore, multiplying the number of oral input available. Among the advantages of using podcasting within education we highlight:

- Available everywhere and at any time
- Controlled by the listener
- Free
- Varied authentic oral input
- Wide thematic variety
- Integrated in students' daily life
- Motivating

We believe podcasting is a wonderful Internet resource to develop extensive listening in EFL context as it provides the learner with massive and varied oral input to overcome the non-native context handicap. Furthermore, being available for downloading into an mp3, iPod, iPhone or any other mobile device increases the number of opportunities of being listened and benefits from the advantages of mobile learning.

2.2. Podcast selection

Podcasts are so popular nowadays that there is a wide range of options from which to choose. Consequently, our first task was to evaluate twenty different podcasts which may be suitable for improving our learners' English. We followed these evaluation criteria:

- English used
- Average duration
- Theme
- Transcript included
- Type of podcast
- Audio/video
- Regular updating

Taking into account the low level of our students and their age and motivations, we decided the most appropriate podcast was 6 Minute English from the BBC website (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/podcasts/series/6min>) because it is weekly updated; it is adapted so the English used is not very difficult; it is not very long (just 6 minutes) so students would be able to listen to it different times; and finally, it offers a variety of topics to cover the different participants' thematic preferences.

2.3. Stages of the project: going mobile

The beginnings of the ESEPOD project can be traced back to a pilot experience during the first semester of the academic year 2009-2010 with 27 students of the Faculty of Education and Humanities of the University of Granada in Melilla (Cortina, 2010) [9]. During a 7-week period participants updated a blog they have created individually with some questions about the podcast they have listened to; what we called "podblogging". Also they were asked to include some remarks about the listening process such as the difficulties they found while listening to the audio file, known and unknown words, and the number of times required to understand it, etc. They listened to a total of 20 podcasts, i.e., three per week. After the experience, a questionnaire was analysed with students' perceptions and results highlighted the good acceptance of the project among participants and their interest on continuing using podcast to improve their English autonomously. However, external observation emphasized the necessity of increasing interactivity among participants so that students could overcome the technical and linguistic difficulties with the help of their peers.

With these results, three university teachers, one expert in EFL assessment and two postgraduate students launched the ESEPOD project in October 2010 thanks to the support of the Unit of Teaching Innovation of the University of Granada (<http://innovaciondocente.ugr.es/>).

During the following academic year a new group of 29 students participated in the project. Participants were asked to subscribe to a podcast and to a shared blog with four of their peers during a period of 10 weeks. The scheme of work was very similar to the previous year, i.e., podblogging, but this time participants were supposed to interact with their mates in the group blog. Questions were asked every week by the supervisor to elicit responses about the podcast. Students were encouraged to discuss about the topic in order to make use of the receptive language they have captured in the audio file (Fig.1).



Fig. 1. Extract from a group blog

After the experience, participants completed a questionnaire about the project, as well as four external evaluators analysed the project. Participants evaluated the experience with a 8,7 out of 10 and reported that their English improved after it. Only a small group were not sure of continuing using podcasting to improve their English. They recognised some technical problems and difficulties in getting use to the dynamic of the project. Also they commented on the necessity of integrating it as part of their formal instruction. On the other hand, evaluators scored the experience with a mean of 8,5 out of 10. Although there was an increase in interactivity among participants, they did not frequently help each other. Also, evaluators highlighted the fact that some participants do not periodically participated in the blog, but they just log on and after 3 weeks and answer all the questions at once. After interviewing those cases who do not regularly participated in the project, they commented that blogs were not very attractive to them and, as it was very important for their final mark, they prefer dedicating more time to other activities.

In order to improve the experience we decided to move a step forward to an easier and more popular tool among participants, accessible from their mobile devices; so from July 2011 a new profile in Facebook called ESEPODugr was launched so that everyone interested in improving their spoken communicative skills can join the project anywhere and at any time (Fig.2). In this case, participants are asked to fill in a questionnaire before they join a discussion group. Within these groups, participants discuss about the podcast they hear every week. Being voluntary, participants are starting slowly but the project is widely accepted with more than 50 friends in less than two months. At the



moment results obtained show an increase in participants' interaction, mainly because most of them were already using Facebook so they frequently connect and check new activity from their friends. Some of the participants have reported on the added value of accessing the project through their mobiles while they are on the beach or on their holidays.



Fig. 2. ESEPOD in Facebook

3. Results and conclusions

So far the ESEPOD project has gone through three different online resources available for mobile devices: the individual blog, the cooperative blog and Facebook discussion groups. Participants' acceptance of the project in the three versions is satisfactory, although students feel more comfortable with the Facebook version as they knew how to use it before starting the project, and they can access it from their mobile phones. Interactivity among the participants increased in the last two versions; also, a higher number of accesses to the discussion have been recorded in the Facebook version.

In relation to podcasting, students consider it very useful although some of them find it difficult to understand 6 minutes of native spoken English on their own. We believe extensive listening can and should be integrated in the EFL curriculum because it improves not only EFL learners' listening skills, but also their overall spoken communication. Furthermore, it provides the FL learner with massive exposure to authentic language.

Nevertheless, there is still a lot of work to be done in the implication of students in these M-learning projects, as they sometimes report on the excess of work these tasks suppose for them. Efforts should centre on the integration of M-learning into the formal curriculum. Besides, more research needs to be done on MALL, mainly in relation to its effectiveness and to the learning strategies used by the learners.

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