# THE POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF PODCASTS FOR LANGUAGE LEARNING

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**Abstract**

In this descriptive study we aim to discuss the potential benefits of using podcasts for language learning purposes in Turkish EFL (English as a foreign language) context. One of their key features is that they remove time and place restrictions in front of language learning enabling learners 24/7 access to audio and video files. Learners also hold the luxury to pause and resume in order to be able to listen to or watch the content for better comprehension. Websites offering professional podcasts update their databases at regular intervals and learners can get access to these new items easily with(out) (un)paid subscription. Furthermore, learners have the opportunity to broadcast and share their self-created podcasts via internet. Briefly podcasting can be employed as an effective tool to raise learner autonomy in language learning. On the other hand, there are some concerns as to the use of podcasts as a tool in English language teaching. The proper selection of the podcasts to download, for instance, is an important stage and cannot be done by every language learner. Besides, the broadcasting of self-created podcasts raises a privacy concern. All of these points that may tend to pose problems for language learners should be handled carefully in order to be able to go through a smooth learning process.

**Keywords:** Podcast, language learning and teaching, internet, technology.

## INTRODUCTION

Today we are living in an era of information and technology. Technology brings us new utilities each passing second. These rapid developments also have their reflections in the educational realm. The advent of useful tools such as smartboards, laptops, smartphones, tablets, iPods, and wireless technologies has contributed much to the teaching and learning processes in almost all fields. The field of English language teaching and learning is one of these. Especially following the introduction of Web 2.0 tools and applications both teaching and learning English have become far more colourful and easier. The potential contributions offered by the use of podcasts constitute a quite significant dimension within this context. As a portmanteau word yielded by the combination of 'iPod' and 'broadcast', a podcast refers to audio or video files that can be accessed via internet. As its name implies podcasts originally referred to files downloaded to iPods, however it has gained a broader scope over time encompassing other digital access tools than iPods. In its current sense, podcasts generally cover audio or video files created or adapted to specifically serve a didactic purpose. Considering those serving to contribute to the development of English language skills of learners, they can be accessed or downloaded via some official websites like that of BBC or other less official websites such as www.eslpod.com.

As a result of the fast developments in technology and education, the expectations of learners are constantly changing. Therefore both teachers and learners are to keep pace with such rapid developments and assume new responsibilities. In the context of this new technology-education paradigm of the 21st century, Bonk (2009: 51) suggests ten openers (WE-ALL-LEARN) likely to foster learning.

- **W**eb Searching in the World of e-Books
- **E**-Learning and Blended Learning
- **A**vailability of Open Source and Free Software
- **L**everaged Resources and OpenCourseWare

- **L**earning Object Repositories and Portals
- **L**earner Participation in Open Information Communities
- **E**lectronic Collaboration
- **A**lternate Reality Learning
- **R**eal-Time Mobility and Portability
- **N**etworks of Personalized Learning

It is clear from the above list that technology and its fruits are becoming an indispensable part of learning processes in the new century. However, it is not so easy to put these into practice. The new and the old generation today are digitally divided. The terms digital native and digital immigrant were introduced by Prensky (2001) to designate this divide. Below is a list of the differences between digital immigrants and digital natives adapted from the list by Zur and Walker (2011) based on Rosen's (2010) and Prensky's (2001) studies.

Table 1: Differences between digital immigrants and digital natives

| Digital Immigrants | Digital Natives |
|---|---|
| Prefer to talk on phone or in person | Prefer to connect via text, chat, Facebook, online games, etc. |
| Do not use text or use it sparingly and reluctantly | Text more than call: Almost half of all teens can text with their eyes closed |
| Prefer synchronistic communication, in real time, such as in f2f or phone conversations | Prefer a-synchronistic or sequential communication, such as in email, Facebook, or chat |
| Accustomed to and prefer instructional manuals with clear sequential steps. As "reflective learners" they like a logical and linear process of discovery | Cannot relate to manuals - Solve problems "intuitively." As "intuitive learners" they are engaged in rapid 'trial and error' actions and prefer discovering via actions, experimentation and interaction rather than by reflection |
| Prefer receiving information slowly: linearly, logically, and sequentially | Prefer receiving information quickly and simultaneously from multiple multimedia and other sources |
| Prefer singular processing and single or limited tasking | Prefer parallel processing, multitasking or task switching |
| Prefer reading text (i.e., books) on processing pictures, sounds and video | Prefer processing and interacting with pictures, graphics, sounds and video before text |
| Inclined to read a book from cover to cover | Inclined to read texts in short bursts, one paragraph at a time, hopping to other activities, such as texting or Facebooking, in between paragraphs |
| | Prefer instant gratification and rewards, do not see value in waiting |
| See high value in deferred gratification and rewards | View the workplace more in egalitarian terms and less in hierarchical (top-down) terms |
| Hierarchical approach to workplace rather than a democratic or egalitarian one | Work intermittently 7 days a week; alternate among play, work, socializing, etc. 24/7. No "end" to the week - continuous flow, natural rhythm |
| Rely on a traditional 5-day work week, followed by an off-work weekend | |
| Hang out in person, clubs, dinners, etc. | Hang out both online (Facebook, texting) and also offline (concerts, parties) |
| Value 'proper' English | Use texting and instant message shorthand: cu tomorrow; luv ya, r u going to the game? |
| Tell friends about a trip on the phone, or with an in-person conversation or at-home slideshow | Tell friends about a trip by posting pictures on Facebook (visual versus verbal or text stories) |
| Use the Internet to gather information | Use the Internet to socialize, play, have |

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|---|---|
| | fun, watch videos, shows, create, etc. |
| Think of the Internet in passive terms of what they can read, review or learn | View the Internet in terms of interaction and participation rather than as passive or one-directional |
| Think young people waste their lives online | Many aspects of life are happening only online |
| Think of the Internet and virtual world as not part of "real life" | Internet is as real, and often more pleasurable and tangible, than offline life |
| One task or pleasure at a time | Like multitasking and task switching. Prefer several tasks or recreation activities at a time: Watch a show, socialize, text, study, play, etc. |
| Value privacy and limit self-disclosure to small circle of friends, if even that | Put highly personal information on social networking sites, where they may have hundreds or even thousands of friends who can view. Also put personal videos on YouTube - not afraid to be known, not especially concerned with privacy |
| Prefer more knowledge and "just-in-case" approach | Prefer to learn "just-in-time" and what is minimally necessary |
| Learning is a necessity and is often unavoidable drudgery | Learning should be fun and knowledge is often acquired via fun activities, such as gaming, surfing the web or social networking. |
| Get their news via traditional news sites (New York Times, local papers) or hard copy newspapers | Get their news from friends via Facebook (political discussions on walls), Twitter, political blogs. Traditional news sites are a part of, but not the central piece, of news for this group |
| Prefer to have 'quality' interaction with one or few people rather than many | Interact/network simultaneously with many, even hundreds of others, as well as with best few friends |

Table 1 makes it clear that digital natives and digital immigrants differ from one another to a remarkable extent. Today we can regard the students born as of 1990s into technology as digital natives and the earlier generations as digital immigrants. As the learner group mostly consists of digital natives their digital expectations should somehow be addressed. The advent of podcasting, within this context, is the subject matter of this paper and is covered in relation to its possible contributions to language learning and teaching processes.

## WHAT IS PODCASTING?

The term *podcasting* was first introduced by Ben Hammersley in a newspaper article on 12 February 2004 titled 'Audible revolution' as follows:

With the benefit of hindsight, it all seems quite obvious. MP3 players, like Apple's iPod, in many pockets, audio production software cheap or free, and weblogging an established part of the internet; all the ingredients are there for a new boom in amateur radio. But what to call it? Audioblogging? Podcasting? GuerillaMedia?" (http://www.theguardian.com/media/2004/feb/12/broadcasting.digitalmedia).

As a fairly recent word, *podcasting* has achieved to be one of the posh terms in the digital world. At the very beginning, podcasts covered only audio files, but later the term began to encompass video files as well.  Even though the video files are sometimes called *vodcasts* in order to make a distinction, the term *podcast* has gained a broad coverage. This coverage has reached such borders that every audio or video file on internet including the ones on popular websites like Youtube has begun to be considered as a podcast. This is a real misconception as to podcasts.

Then what makes podcasts different from ordinary audio or video files?  Rosell-Aguilar (2007: 472) clarifies this point as follows: "The fact that podcasting uses RSS is what differentiates it from simple downloading or streaming. The use of RSS, or Really Simple Syndication, means that the user can subscribe to a podcast that will be downloaded automatically every time there is an update or new content is uploaded." In order to be regarded as a podcast, an audio or video file needs to be a part of an automatically-updated system. Another dimension is the subscription system. Users can get access to podcasts through free or paid subscription (depends on the website) and get automatic updates via RSS (Really Simple Syndication) extension. These podcasts can be downloaded and played through software like iTunes and QuickTime. Once downloaded, the podcasts can be played offline, which renders the system independent and easily-accessible on the part of the users.

**WHAT DOES PODCASTING PROMISE FOR LANGUAGE LEARNING AND TEACHING?**

Podcasting holds uses for both learners and teachers and both parties have two alternatives to utilize this tool: using existing podcasts or creating one's own original podcasts. This two-alternative model is illustrated by Rosell-Aguilar (2007: 476) as follows:



Figure 1: Taxonomy of uses of podcasting for language learning (Rosell-Aguilar, 2007: 476).

The easier alternative here for both students and teachers is making use of existing podcasts. There are a number of podcast sites specially designed for language learning. The following is a concise list of the popular ones:
- www.podcastsinenglish.com
- https://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org
- www.bbc.co.uk/podcasts/genre/learning
- www.eslpod.com
- learningenglish.voanews.com/Podcast
- www.listen-to-english.com
- www.betteratenglish.com

- esl.culips.com
- legacy.australianetwork.com/learningenglish
- allearsenglish.com
- teacherluke.co.uk
- zappenglish.com/podcasts

The existing podcast sites are not limited to the above list. Both students and teachers can easily find and utilize an unlimited number of resources on such sites that are designed to help them in their language-related studies. For students, for example, such digital tools and learning aids can be really motivating as audio-video resources appeal to digital natives far more than written resources. Working both online and offline (once downloaded) on almost any portable digital device, podcasts remove time and place restrictions. Thus students hold the option to extend their studies out of the classroom and improve their language skills on their own, which makes them autonomous learners. As podcasts consist of audio and video files, they constitute an invaluable tool that contributes to the development of listening and pronunciation skills. Especially in foreign language learning contexts it is hard to access authentic materials. Podcasts remove this barrier through original speech, dialogues, radio and TV programmes, etc. They also foster other language skills, reading and vocabulary skills in particular. Podcast sites generally offer the transcripts of the audio-video files with accompanying exercises. Accordingly, language learners can reap an integrated benefit from podcasts on their journey to develop language skills. On the other hand, such websites offer benefits for also language teachers. They can bring to-the-point audio-video files to the classroom or ask students to consolidate a specific aspect through a suggested podcast at home.

The difficult alternative 'creating one's own original podcasts' is a bit more demanding but much more enjoyable. This time the learner takes the lead and produces something. Thus they become much more active through learning by doing. Meng (2005: 2) lists five steps for podcasting/vodcasting:
- Create or capture and edit the content.
- Publish content to a web site or blog.
- Subscribe to the content using an "RSS News Reader".
- Download the content into content management software (CMS).
- Play content on download device or synchronize CMS with portable media player and play

The above list may seem a bit technical to especially digital immigrants, but once achieved it gives a real sense of achievement to those who are involved in the process. Meng (2005: 5) lists the following possible uses of creating podcasts:
- Record and distribute news broadcasts.
- Recorded teacher's notes.
- Recorded lectures distributed directly to student's MP3 players.
- Recorded meeting and conference notes.
- Student projects and project support interviews.
- Oral history archiving and on-demand distribution.

Podcasting is harder than making use of the existing podcasts for both learners and teachers, but getting involved in such a process will enhance the sense of learning by doing, raise student-student and student-teacher communication, and broaden the students' out-of-class experiences. Teachers, through podcasting, can turn their classes into flipped classrooms and focus more on the practical dimension within class hours. At this point, *digital immigrant* teachers may be disadvantageous as creating podcasts requires a certain level of technical knowledge, however by facing their technology-related weaknesses and getting external help they can handle this disadvantage. The teachers' role is quite important in the use of podcasts in that they are expected to guide the students about when and how to utilize certain podcasting websites. Podcasts will of limited use for language learners if not supported with rich linguistic content. Digital divide is another problem here. It may not be possible for all students to have access to internet 24/7 and some websites require paid subscription. Such issues may cause a real disadvantage for some students. In such cases, teachers should do their best to assist these disadvantaged students. Podcasts may sometimes be distractive for students as the

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cyber world is exempt from restrictions. Lures from other tools like social media accounts may probably distract self-studying learners from the actual task they focus on. Also for some learners, the use of podcasts may cause overdependence on technology over time. Therefore a sheer balance should be established between paper-pencil studies and computer-screen studies. To this end, students should be made aware of the potential benefits of using podcasts for language learning and their studies on the existing podcasts or their own podcast-producing experiences should be carefully guided by the language teacher.

## CONCLUSION

Podcasting is a relatively new concept in the educational realm. However, "newer is not always better" as Yaden (2007: 1) puts it. What makes a novelty useful and practical is the proper running of the application process. To support this point Yaden states (2007: 2) "as with all technology, the most difficult part is finding the most sound pedagogical use for the resource…" That is, the integration process is of vital importance on the way to reap positive outcomes. Therefore, the use of podcasts for language learning and teaching purposes has definitely several merits; nevertheless, the weak points likely to be involved in the application process should be carefully identified and eliminated as much as possible. In the light of the coverage of this paper, a brief list of pros and cons of podcasting for language learning and teaching is provided below:

**Pros**
• Motivating
• Appeals to digital natives
• Omnipresent-no time and place restriction
• Enhances learner autonomy
• Both online and offline
• Contributes to the development of listening and pronunciation skills
• Also supports other language skills
• Limitless resources
• Authentic (native use of language)
• Involves both teacher and student

**Cons**
• Digital divide
• Digital immigrant teachers
• Will be of limited use if not supported with rich linguistic content
• May sometimes be distractive
• Creating podcasts requires technical knowledge
• Some websites require paid subscription
• May cause overdependence on technology over time

The above-listed pros and cons clearly demonstrate that the positive aspects of using podcasts for language learning and teaching far outweigh its disadvantages. What counts here is the presence of an effective planning process. By its very nature podcasting address more to students. For this reason, language teachers should undertake a guiding role throughout the process of access to right podcast sites and encourage students to create their own podcasts on a regular basis. Thus the receptive benefits of podcasting could be extended to productive outcomes. Last but not least, there is a broad need for experimental studies on this new horizon in the field of language learning and teaching. Studies to be carried out in different contexts such as teachers creating podcasts, students creating podcasts, and students and teachers utilizing podcasts produced and uploaded by others. Each prospective study is expected to shed light upon the applied dimension of podcasts in the realm of education and language learning-teaching.

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