Podcasts and second language learning
Promoting listening comprehension and intercultural competence

Kara McBride

This chapter discusses how podcasts that were not originally made specifically for second language (L2) learners can be used in L2 classes to promote listening comprehension and intercultural competence. The chapter first defines and describes podcasts and offers strategies for locating useful ones. Next, listening comprehension is examined in order to identify practices that may improve bottom-up and top-down skills and the automaticity by which these are executed. The topic of authenticity is reviewed in terms of how authentic podcasts are a rich source of cultural and pragmatic information, and when students learn how to find podcasts of interest to them, they are likely to become more motivated and autonomous learners. The issue of how to avoid potentially offensive materials is also touched upon. Finally, this chapter outlines activities that can be done in class and out, keeping in mind potential curricular- and time-related restrictions and giving suggestions for how the above-mentioned skills can be targeted, as well as vocabulary building, collaboration, and pronunciation practice.

1. Introduction

Podcasts were first produced in 2004 (Hegelheimer & O'Bryan, 2008), and by 2005, nearly a third of all owners of mp3 players had downloaded one (Rainie & Madden, 2005). Podcasts represent yet another way in which the Internet has made available to its users vast quantities of information in the form of a new medium. Presented with this new linguistic resource, second language (L2) pedagogy should investigate whether and how podcasts can be used to promote second language acquisition (SLA). There have been published articles that give broad overviews of types and possible pedagogical uses of podcasts (McCarty, 2005; Rossell-Aguilar, 2007; Sze, 2006; Young, 2007) and how best to incorporate podcasts into L2 classes (Abdous, Camarena, & Facer, 2009; Craig, Paraiso, &
Pattén, 2007; Schmidt, 2008), while others discuss more specific uses, such as podcasts created by language learners for the purpose of improving their pronunciation skills (Lord, 2008) and podcasts created by instructors for teaching academic listening skills (O’Bryan & Hegelheimer, 2007).

This chapter focuses on the use, in L2 classes, of podcasts that were made by third parties without the original intention of them being used by language learners. The two main objectives of such a practice are to improve listening comprehension (LC) and to teach intercultural competence. I begin with a definition of podcasts, choosing to define that term in a wider sense that has come into popular usage. I then discuss L2 LC and its development in order to examine how listening to podcasts can most advantageously be approached by teachers and learners. This leads into a discussion of the use of authentic materials and the teaching of intercultural competence. Finally, specific class-related activities are proposed.

2. A definition

Podcasts are audio files, usually in mp3 format, that can be downloaded from the Internet. Several authors have insisted that only files that are syndicated count as podcasts (e.g., Abdous, et al., 2009; Godwin-Jones, 2005; Rossell-Aguilar, 2007; Stanley, 2006; but see Lu, 2008). This means that where the podcast is published, there is an option for subscribing to it. Subscription is often accomplished as easily as clicking on a button, so that every time a new audio file is added to the collection of a particular podcast series, subscribers can be automatically notified, or, more commonly, automatically receive a downloaded copy of the new episode on their computer and/or mp3 player. The most widely used program for such automatic delivery is iTunes, but a site such as Podcatchermatrix directs one to many, alternative aggregators or podcatchers, as they are called. Like iTunes and other programs for downloading, playing, organizing, and transferring podcasts, almost all podcasts are free.

The term podcast has been extended in some popular usage to include most downloadable sound files on the Internet, without them needing to be either syndicated, nor one in a series of episodes, although both features are common. By adopting the broader meaning of “podcast,” we include more potential resources for teachers.

1. There are also video podcasts, although these are less common. Their usage does not afford users the same mobility, and V. Askildson (2008) found that language learners were much less interested in using video rather than audio podcasts.


Many corporations (e.g., McDonald’s) and professional groups (e.g., TESOL) post podcasts on their webpages with some regularity, to provide an alternative form of update about their organization. This is also a common practice among libraries and universities, with many universities doing so through iTunes U. Other entities that regularly post podcasts are radio stations (e.g., National Public Radio, which provides full transcripts for most stories), professional journals, especially in the sciences (e.g., Molecular Medicine), and news organizations. Some periodicals, for example, The Economist, provide versions of their publications in mp3 format, but the download is only available to paying subscribers, while others, like The New Yorker, provide free audio versions of selected articles. All of these examples are referred to as podcasts.

So far, professionally-made podcasts have been highlighted, but probably far more of all podcasts are made by private individuals who publish not for commercial purposes but instead for personal, social, and entertainment reasons. Frequently they follow a talk radio format, dominated by commentary, mixed in with occasional songs. Like radio shows, they often include interviews with guests and responses to listeners who have called or left voice or text messages over the Internet.

Podcast directories are described by some (e.g., Rossell-Aguilar, 2007; Schmidt, 2008; Stanley, 2006) as the primary way of locating podcasts. However, performing a Google search for the keyword “podcast” plus other search terms of interest should be just as, if not more, effective. Also, podcatchers facilitate but are not essential for downloading the sound files. Files in mp3


8. Another source of online sound files which has great potential educationally are the spoken versions of Wikipedia articles, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Spoken_articles>, although these fall outside of even most loose usages of the term “podcast.”

9. This can be especially effective in looking for podcasts in languages other than English. By using search terms in the language one is interested in, one is directed to podcasts produced in that language. Although the examples listed earlier in this article are all English examples, podcasts are widely available in many languages. Also important to note is that most podcast directories, including the iTunes Store, do not allow one to do a search based on language.

10. With PCs, right-clicking on the link to the sound file will bring up a menu that includes “Save link as...”, which then allows one to save the file locally. With Macs, holding down the option key and clicking on the link to the mp3 file allows downloading.
format can easily be copied onto mp3 players and many other mobile devices, such as most cell phones. Some of these devices can play other audio formats as well, and when they cannot, conversion is possible via a number of free or low-priced programs.11

This is the other major advantage that podcasts present potential users with: besides expanding people’s access to recorded materials to a practically limitless amount of up-to-date materials from all over the world, podcast technology allows the listener to be mobile. Of course personal stereos existed before, but few people had access to materials that lent themselves easily as L2 lessons. Such materials used to be mostly the property of language laboratories, requiring students to go to the technology. Now technology, especially in its more recent, small, and convenient form, can travel with the learner. Being available when and where the L2 learner wants, makes listening to materials less burdensome and more attractive to the student (Windham, 2007; Young, 2007). Mobile learning solutions also alleviate institutions of some of the needed hours of available language lab space, thus presenting a possible financial benefit.

Students belonging to the Net Generation – born between 1977 and 1997 – typically are (or feel) extremely busy but are fond of and fairly good at multitasking (Tapscott, 2009). They are likely to own, carry with them, and be familiar with the workings of a device that plays sound files (Rainie & Madden, 2005; Schmidt, 2008). For all of these reasons, podcasts appear to be an excellent format for delivering L2 materials to students of the Net Generation, as well as other students who study through distance learning programs, who typically also are pressed for time, unable to regularly attend a (physical) language lab or perhaps even classroom, and need alternative formats for the delivery of educational materials. Finally, using podcasts in language lessons has indeed been found to be in itself motivating for many learners (Craig, et al., 2007; Windham, 2007).

Still, podcasts should not be used for teaching L2 except in pedagogically sound ways that fit with SLA theory. Decoo (2001) warns that “... quite often ‘the media makes the method’” (p. 9) – meaning that educators sometimes allow a new technology to dominate choices about approaches to language teaching, when instead one should begin from a clear understanding of what kinds of activities promote SLA, and then find and use whatever tools best support those activities. The rest of this chapter aims to demonstrate that for the purpose of teaching LC, transcultural competence, and strategic and autonomous L2 study skills, podcasts are a valuable resource.

11. One way of doing this is to use the “Convert selection to mp3” option in iTunes, found in menus connected to importing preferences.

3. Listening comprehension

LC is achieved through the employment of a combination of top-down and bottom-up skills (Rost, 2002; Vandergrift, 2004). Bottom-up skills involve listening to sounds, perceiving words and sentences among them, and parsing these. Top-down skills are those that use general world knowledge and background information to activate appropriate schemata through which to interpret spoken messages. Both types of skills are required for all LC.

The way in which top-down and bottom-up skills interact is variable, depending on the task, context, and listener (Flowerdew & Miller, 2005; Wu, 1998). Successful L2 LC is accomplished through an orchestration of strategies, using those that best match a given task (McBride, 2008; Vandergrift, 2003b). Learners benefit from training in metacognitive awareness about LC and in top-down processes such as using background information to form hypotheses about the spoken message (Vandergrift, 2003a, 2004). Top-down listening skills can largely compensate for incomplete bottom-up processing when there is a good match between the listener’s expectations and what is said, but when this is not the case, skilled bottom-up processing is what distinguishes more skilled listeners from less successful ones (Tsui & Fuliliove, 1998). Therefore, bottom-up skill development is also essential.

L2 students often fail to recognize in a spoken text words they do in fact know (Field, 2000), and even successful retrieval of words may be excessively slow. Bottom-up skill building takes the form of moving the learner towards automatized word recognition and parsing. When these processes are not yet automatized, they can present such a strain to working memory that they short-circuit LC (Carpenter, Miyake, & Just, 1994; Hulstijn, 2003), blocking the listener’s ability to remember properly or make connections between parts of the message.

L2 learners, especially in a classroom environment, learn many words in the written form first and then must learn to associate their knowledge about the words with the way the words sound when spoken. They also must learn a great deal about how words sound when strung together and are pronounced in natural, faster, and less careful speech. The teaching of these bottom-up skills ought to be approached from two sides: (1) through focused listening skills which direct the learner’s attention on specific features of the aural input, and (2) through extensive exposure to authentic speech.
4. Authentic materials

As Little (1997) says, "...we cannot expect learners to cope with target language communication in the world outside the classroom if we do not prepare them by bringing examples of that communication into the classroom" (p. 226). L2 classes provide students with the opportunity to encounter authentic language while receiving support from the scaffolding that is provided by a well-planned lesson. Learners at first will only be able to perform the task when given a large amount of assistance, but as practice continues, the teacher's support is needed less and less, until the student is able to do the task on his or her own (Lantolf & Thorne, 2007).

If students gain the skills to work with authentic aural texts through their L2 classes, they are more likely to also listen to such texts on their own. Thus, teaching students both how to find interesting podcasts, and how to approach listening to authentic texts through strategic listening and generally improved LC skills, allows students to be autonomous learners. Getting learners in the habit of accessing interesting target language podcasts gives the learners a dual purpose in continuing to access these materials on their own: not only does it help them in their SLA, but the materials themselves will be a draw.

L2 learners find working with authentic listening materials motivating and useful (Dupuy, 1999). Vandergrift (2004) also describes two studies that support this: "Both elementary school students (Vandergrift, 2002) and university students of French (Vandergrift, 2003a) found it motivating to learn to understand rapid, authentic texts and responded overwhelmingly in favor of this approach" (p. 9). Successfully working with an authentic speech sample is exciting. Being able to listen to discussions of topics of personal interest to one is also very important. Finally, podcasts give learners many more opportunities to hear speech from the particular social group that they wish to learn about and perhaps identify with. This reference group may be defined by age, lifestyle, ethnic group, accent, or otherwise. The diversity of podcast producers makes it likely that materials from within this group can be found, and such material will be of especially high interest to the learner, promoting SLA (Beebe, 1985). Listening to a social group's podcasts can allow students to feel more a part of that culture (Craig, et al., 2007). Further, it can provide valuable lessons in pragmatics. Often L2 learners acquire excessively formal speech habits that are inappropriate for the social situations that they will later find themselves in. Interviews, phone calls, and other kinds of social exchanges are common features of podcasts and can serve as models for the L2 listener.

Authentic texts also give students vital ways of connecting with the culture of study. The Modern Language Association's (MLA) 2007 report urges language educators to teach intercultural competence, which entails being able to "comprehend and analyze the cultural narratives that appear in every kind of expressive form" (p. 238). Instead of adhering to the monolithic narrative of an education based exclusively on canonical texts, one needs exposure to a variety of voices within a culture in order to approach an understanding of it.

5. Lesson plans

5.1 Avoid overwhelming participants

Having looked at the construct of LC and discussed reasons for incorporating authentic, recently made materials in the form of podcasts into an L2 class, this last part of the chapter discusses specific activities that can be introduced by a teacher into L2 classes. One of the guiding concerns in designing this kind of a lesson will be the need to avoid overwhelming either the student or the teacher. The student runs the risk of being overwhelmed because the materials used are authentic and not made with L2 learners in mind. To address this potential problem, the teacher must create listening tasks at an appropriate level of difficulty. Frequently this is determined by the nature of the materials with which the students work. When working with authentic materials, this can be controlled somewhat (for example by choosing more familiar topics, or a certain type of genre or accent), but not entirely. It is instead the nature of the task that will determine the level of difficulty.

L2 learners should not be expected to achieve full comprehension of authentic listening passages. Instead, they should be given tasks divided into small enough steps and reasonable goals so that they can be successful at each stage. As is common in the teaching of L2 reading comprehension, students can be given texts that are in one sense well above their level, and then be asked to perform tasks that do not require full textual comprehension, such as summarizing main ideas or identifying key words (Grabe & Stoller, 2001). It is important to communicate to the students the worth of such exercises and reasonableness of the expectations. Pointing out the frequently incomplete nature of first language (L1) LC - given, for example, that it is possible for two people to come away with different interpretations of the same conversation - can help to illustrate this point.

Another way that LC with authentic materials can be made more attainable is through the manipulations of recordings that technology affords (Hulstijn, 2003; Robin, 2007). Learner control over speech rate and pausing enhances immediate LC (Zhao, 1997), and repetition (Jensen & Vinther, 2003) and adjustments in rate of speech (Jensen & Vinther, 2003; McBride, 2007) can aid in the development of L2 LC over time. In several ways the digitized nature of podcasts can be exploited to allow L2 learners of all levels to use authentic listening materials to extract meaning and improve their LC.
Incorporating podcasts into class activities will require some teachers to 
first become familiar with new technology. This, fortunately, is mostly a one-time 
commitment and can be done fairly quickly with the help of a personal tutorial or 
online guides. The other problem is that of finding appropriate materials, creating 
lessons to go along with them, and responding to students in ways that will 
support their language acquisition. Ideas for accomplishing all of this without 
resulting in a much greater workload are incorporated into the suggestions given 
below. One overarching principle that needs to be kept in mind is to avoid treating 
technology-based activities as mere additions to a course and instead seek 
ways to fully integrate them into the course. When technology-based activities are an integral part of a course, they prove to be of greater benefit to the students 
(Askildson, 2008; Craig, et al., 2007; Richards, 2005; Schmidt, 2008).

5.1 Using podcasts of the teacher's choosing

Creating podcast-based lessons presents the teacher with the burden of finding the 
podcast ahead of time. One way of addressing this problem is for the teacher to 
find a podcast that he or she enjoys listening to and then incorporating this into his or her regular routine. Listening to podcasts in the language that one teaches, one frequently encounters instances of the grammatical structures, functional concepts, and vocabulary that one is about to cover in class. Because mp3 players are in fact so convenient, one can listen to podcasts when walking down the street or driving to work. Listening regularly to a podcast, therefore, does not necessarily represent much extra time for the teacher. Alternatively, teachers might look for podcasts on specific topics. This can be done by entering well-chosen keywords along with the keyword "podcast," as described previously. Students in beginning classes will not be in a position to follow conversations about many topics. However the sorts of themes that are normally covered in beginning classes, such as salutations, descriptions of people, and telling time, can be found quite easily in podcasts. Salutations, for example, are common in interviews and when speakers send greetings out to family and friends. Podcasts discussing celebrities or reviewing movies will frequently yield descriptions of people.

By also including the word "transcript" in an Internet search, one can find podcasts that are accompanied by these. The advantages of transcripts are many: one can review the contents more quickly; one can be certain of exactly what was said; and transcripts can be used in lessons for read-along activities, cloze exercises, pronunciation exercises, and so on. Other podcasts do not come with a transcript but are published next to articles that present basically the same information.

5.3 Leading classroom-based podcast activities

A teacher may choose to run a podcast-based activity during which everyone in the class listens and works together. One advantage of this method is that the teacher can model each step and respond to students’ questions and concerns as they arise. This might be particularly useful for the first time a class works with authentic recordings. A teacher might instead choose to have students work largely independently in a lab together. The teacher could still be available to answer questions, but students would have the freedom to proceed at their own pace, controlling playback, rewind, and perhaps speed. Since L2 learners can have quite different ways of arriving at LC, this would allow students to experience a lesson more precisely suited to their needs (Vandergrift, 2004). This would also address the common problem of having students with different levels of listening proficiency. In this case, a teacher might devise a lesson around a core activity to be done with a shorter segment of a podcast, but provide additional activities for more advanced students to work with other segments of the podcast.

The lesson ought to start with a pre-task activity to activate background knowledge and appropriate schemata. Since many podcasts are available on their own web pages, one could show the web page to the students and discuss visual cues and what information it is possible to ascertain about the makers of the podcast. In rare cases, such as NASA14, both video and audio-only versions of podcasts are available. Teachers could view part of the video with the students with the sound turned off and discuss what the images are and predict the content of the podcast.

5.4 Tasks

Generally one will want to work with a short (1–4 min.) segment of a podcast instead of its full length, which typically can range between eight minutes and an hour. A teacher may choose to edit the sound file down to only the part of the recording that is to be worked with. This can be done easily with a number of sound

---

12. Some likely sources for these are US embassies, NPR, NASA, science journals, and others. Unfortunately, transcripts appear to be much less common in languages other than English.

13. The practice of reading while listening to a recording of the same text has been shown to improve reading (L. Askildson, 2008).

 editing software programs, for example the freeware Audacity, which works with the same copy-paste paradigm that most people are familiar with through Word, or Garage Band, which is a standard program on Macs. Another even simpler solution would simply be to tell the students where in the file to listen, for example between 1:13 and 2:46.

During the first few times that beginning and intermediate students listen to authentic recordings, they will probably understand little of what is being said, but there are still many ways students can work with the listening passage. The following is a list of questions learners could answer (perhaps, depending on their proficiency and the course goals, in their L1) at this stage.

1. What do you think is the general topic of this podcast?
2. What kind of people do you imagine the speakers are? What might they look like? How old are they? Are they highly educated? Etc.
3. Where were the speakers, probably, when they recorded this podcast?
4. How did the speakers probably feel when they were recording?

These questions target top-down listening skills. To target bottom-up listening skills, students could be asked to write a list of some of the words that they understood. Students might be encouraged to do this without rewinding or pausing, but instead seeing what can be understood just in the first try. Although the list may be short, the exercise can show that some comprehension is achieved even early on. Later, students can be provided with a list of some key terms and asked to indicate where in the sound file they heard those key terms. They can indicate this by writing down the time (for example 1:37) at which they heard a particular word.

To develop bottom-up skills, students need to learn how native and advanced speakers of the target language speak. To do this, quite a bit of time should be spent on listening carefully and repeatedly to a limited amount of speech. At the earliest stages of listening, students could simply be asked to describe their impression of how the speech sounds. This is an activity that can be fun, gets beginning learners engaged with authentic speech, and yet makes it clear that the LC activities need not cause high anxiety or a sense of failure.

Individual words or phrases can be isolated and listened to several times, optionally at a slowed-down speed, allowing the students to understand how the word is spoken in naturally occurring speech. In a related activity, students could attempt to imitate the podcast speakers' pronunciation. This will allow them to understand better how the pronunciation is performed by the model speakers, and it may also help their pronunciation. They might also be encouraged to express in words the differences that they perceive between the podcasts speakers and other models they have heard before. As students gain a better understanding of how words in the target language are spoken in natural speech, their ability to follow authentic speech will improve dramatically.

As students comprehend more of the contents of a podcast, they can answer questions based more on the content of the message. They might be asked to give an outline of what they believe is said in the recording, or answer some comprehension questions about it. Asking about very specific details of a conversation, however, should generally be avoided. These kinds of trivial questions, as they are called, are not accurate indicators of LC and function more like tests of memory (Shohamy & Inbar, 1991).

To promote and exploit the idea that extensive listening improves LC and that students are not always expected to experience full comprehension of authentic passages, students could be given copies of the sound file and asked to listen to it several times on their own, on their mp3 players or on a computer. Students might write their reflections on the experience, noting if after a few repetitions they began to understand more. Students might also journal about questions that have come up from listening to the passage. These might be questions about pronunciation, vocabulary, or something about the target culture. Reading these kinds of questions can give teachers excellent insight into the confusions and interests that students have.

After students have been able to extract some meaning from the podcast, they could share their impressions with the class. Students could exchange strategies and cues that they used to understand the podcast, thus enhancing each other's repertoires of strategies. If several students contribute different insights into the podcast, then the next time they listen to the podcast, they will understand more. The teacher's contributions of some additional information (perhaps keywords, background information, or cultural insights) would also be valuable. One or two iterations of adding to the collective understanding of the podcast in this way could lead the group to a relatively high level of comprehension of the recording in the end, and this successful ending could be quite satisfying and motivating to the students. Following multiple episodes of the same podcast might lead to even deeper understandings, as well as ensure that students begin their listening exercises with background knowledge of the storyline.

Sharing among classmates impressions and reactions to the podcast could also be a springboard for discussions and offer many opportunities for follow-up speaking and writing assignments. As Little (1997) says, "Once learners have derived some meaning, however slight, from their encounter with the authentic
text, it can be used as an object of linguistic exploration and a quarry from which learners can borrow words and phrases in order to construct meanings of their own" (p. 229).

5.5 Student-found podcasts

Since one important advantage of podcasts is that students have the chance to find materials of particular interest to them, teachers ought to consider incorporating activities that make use of podcasts that the students have chosen. This might most beneficially be done after students have experienced a group-supported lesson involving some of the activities described in the previous section.

This type of activity will require more technical work on the part of the student. In all cases when students are expected to use technology, it is essential to spend the needed amount of time to train students on the technology (Schmidt, 2008; Young, 2007). Students may need to be trained on not only how to download podcasts and transfer them on to whatever device they are going to listen to them on, but they will also need to be taught how to find podcasts and choose keywords wisely. Unfortunately, even well-chosen search terms may result in hits on inappropriate material (Schmidt, 2008), and this may be reason enough for some teachers in some contexts to decide not to use this kind of activity. However students need to develop the skills to find materials that are appropriate for them, and if the instructor intends to teach the students skills that will enable them to become autonomous learners, then helping them to learn how to find appropriate listening materials can be of great benefit.

The activities that the students would then work through could be many of the same activities that were suggested above, but individual work makes listening to longer segments of a podcast more appropriate. In this, students will inevitably encounter many new words and expressions. Students should be encouraged to listen for words that they hear often and then try to look those words up. Looking up an unknown term in Google would be more likely to succeed than looking up a new term in a dictionary, because when one enters a word that is slightly misspelled into Google, many times one is then asked if one instead meant a related but correctly spelled word. Students who are successful in discovering interesting new terms might do an online image search on that word and then find out what that word represents visually in the target culture when the word is expressed in the target language. Similarly, they might look up newly learned phrases via the Internet by putting quotation marks around a phrase. They could then skim a few of the pages where the phrase is used and learn more about what kinds of contexts the phrase is used in.

After finding and working with podcasts, students could write about their podcasts or talk about their podcasts orally in class. They could give a critique of the podcasts and discuss what related information they learned, linguistically or culturally. By sharing this information, other students' interest may be sparked, potentially leading them to engage more with the target language. It might also be an occasion for students to share learning strategies. An exchange between classmates about common interests could promote a sense of community (Lord, 2008) and provide an important opportunity for meaningful interaction, which is essential to SLA. Discussions about student-found podcasts might include sharing small segments of the podcast with the whole class. This would provide other students with further listening practice and could be an occasion for the teacher to supply additional information or clarifications.

6. Conclusion

The last suggestion, of encouraging students to engage in a type of show-and-tell with their podcasts, would not be appropriate with some less mature students, nor a comfortable activity for teachers who are not confident about their own LC skills. However, in some situations this would be an appropriate and effective way of promoting meaningful interaction, while saving the teacher from having to listen to every podcast student worked with. It is not necessary that the teachers monitor all of the listening activities of their students. Nor is it necessary that students achieve accurate comprehension in every LC exercise. Listening, like reading, is improved through extensive practice. By teaching students how to locate materials of potential interest to them, along with developing skills for approaching authentic materials, the instructor raises interest and motivation, increases the opportunities for intercultural understanding, improves LC, and enables students to be autonomous, lifelong learners of both language and culture.

References


Vandergrift, L. (2002). "It was nice to see that our predictions were right." Developing metacognition in L2 listening comprehension. *Canadian Modern Language Review*, 58, 555–575.


