

TECHNOLOGY APPLICATIONS FOR THE ADVANCED LEVEL: A RETURN TO THE PODCAST

There are a dizzying number of new technology applications at our fingertips, and our students now tweet, IM, and video chat to increase their foreign language competencies. Many of these tools are exciting, but as we continue to explore and embrace (or perhaps reject) new applications, I want to invite us to return to an early innovation in Web 2.0 technology that deserves another look: the podcast.

Many foreign language classes have now experimented with creating podcasts, interviewing native speakers for their classes, or creating radio shows for the community. These oral podcasts demand a high level of student engagement and often a substantial time commitment from both students and teacher, and the results can be very rewarding. Another use of the podcast, one that is perhaps less frequently included as a structured component of students' grades, is to have students listen regularly to authentic broadcasts recorded in the target language and culture. There are a great number of these available, from RFI's *Le Journal en français facile* to the *104 Histoires de Nouvelle France* broadcast from Quebec. Anecdotally, we know that these are useful activities, since increased exposure to the language and culture generally results in greater linguistic and cultural competence, with some exceptions. However, Lomicka and Ducate (2009) have noted that podcast-related research is relatively undeveloped, and while student attitude surveys show generally positive perceptions of listening to podcasts, there is less data as students reach more advanced levels of language acquisition.¹ This column focuses on a small study of 18 students in a Business French class at the low-advanced level (fifth semester language study at a university). Its results suggest that regular listening to

authentic podcasts not only helps students gain important confidence in their language ability, but it also increases their knowledge of and interest in Francophone world affairs.

As students enter upper-level language courses, they often express frustration at their perceived lack of vocabulary. Many students at this level can follow native speaker speech, but they lack precision in articulating their own thoughts and ideas, a characteristic of the advanced-low speaker.² In my own class, attitude surveys conducted at the beginning of the semester showed that 93% of students listed speaking as their greatest weakness (a perception that did not always bear out once their writing skills were assessed!).³ Whether or not this is a valid estimation, this student self-perception is notable because it can create anxiety and serve as a barrier to making linguistic progress and achieving oral fluency.⁴

In brainstorming how to use instructional technology to address this issue, I decided to require students to subscribe to two French language podcasts. My assumption was that regular listening would help students to acquire and reinforce content-specific vocabulary in an authentic environment (in this case, business and economic terms), which matched one of the course's primary goals. A secondary objective was to introduce students to contemporary business issues, which I believed would foster a greater interest in the subject matter. Finally, I hoped that this knowledge base would transfer to a greater ease in spontaneous speech production, especially as it related to the course content.

At the beginning of the semester, students were given a list of ten podcasts and vodcasts (video podcasts) that covered cur-

rent affairs, economics, and business news reports (see Figure 1). They were required to listen to at least two podcasts in French each week, and one of the broadcasts had to last more than ten minutes. During the first half of the semester, they maintained a (written) weekly blog summarizing the podcasts, and in the second half, they recorded oral analyses via VoiceThread (see Figure 2). Podcast content was addressed informally in class, with students sharing information in small groups and in whole class discussions, and the blogs and VoiceThread assignments were assessed using a holistic scoring method. The combined assignments represented 10% of their final grade.

To gauge how students perceived their own linguistic and cultural progress, I conducted attitude surveys before and after the podcast listening period (at weeks 3 and 12). The results point to several reasons for including podcasts in our assignments. When asked how they thought podcasts had affected their listening comprehension skills, 79% said they had made notable improvement, and 21% said that had made a great deal of improvement. When asked to select the primary area in which they noticed this improvement, 42% of students selected "Speed of discourse," 38% selected "Ability to follow along in French for prolonged period" and 19% chose "Vocabulary Comprehension." Other areas of improvement cited included speaking (44%), reading (33%) and writing (17%).

When asked which podcasts they found most useful, students reported a preference for the longer video casts, which lasted an average of 20 minutes (versus the 2-5 minute audio podcasts). I was initially surprised by this choice, but students explained in their responses that the visual component made the broadcasts both more ac-

RFI: Afrique presse	Audio	www.rfi.fr/radiofr/emissions/072/accueil_37.asp
FranceInfo: Tout info, tout éco	Audio	www.france-info.com/Podcast-0-78-89.html
FranceInfo: Question d'argent	Audio	www.france-info.com/Podcast-0-78-89.html
FranceInter: L'édito éco	Audio	sites.radiofrance.fr/franceinter/chro/leditoeco/
FranceInter: Le débat économique	Audio	sites.radiofrance.fr/franceinter/chro/ledebateconomique/
FranceInter : L'éco Autrement	Audio	sites.radiofrance.fr/franceinter/chro/lecoautrement/
FranceInter: Géopolitique	Audio	sites.radiofrance.fr/franceinter/chro/geopolitique/
France 24: L'invité de l'économie	Video	www.france24.com/fr/podcasts/video
France 24 : Finance	Video	www.france24.com/fr/finance
France 24: Intelligence économique	Video	www.france24.com/fr/category/tags-emissions/intelligence-economique

Figure 1: Table of Business and Economic Podcasts and Vodcasts

cessible and more engaging (“they were easier to follow because I could watch them”). Class favorites included France 24’s *Intelligence économique* and *L’Invité de l’économie*, followed by France Info’s *L’Actu des régions*, and France Inter’s *Géopolitique*, hosted by Bernard Guetta.

Open-ended questions at the survey’s close garnered the following responses:

“I have greatly expanded my business-specific vocabulary and understanding of differences between French and American business practices. Definitely my vocabulary (business-related) has improved.”

“While listening to the podcasts, I have noticed improvement in understanding rapid French. While I still have trouble, it is easier to understand the conversation. Also, I understand more and more business vocabulary. Finally, I have improved in understanding different voices; it has become easier for me to understand all different types of voices and accents.”

“Listening to a rapid exchange has helped me follow French movies and other media better.”

“I feel like I can speak French a little more fluently.”

Before taking this class, 71% of students had never listened to podcasts (in French or in English). At the end of the semester, 93% said that they were likely or very likely to continue to listen to podcasts in French, suggesting a strong enthusiasm for the assignments and perhaps for the user-friendly nature of the technology. An interesting follow-up study would be to survey this group to see whether or not they have continued this listening practice and to probe how it may help them to sustain language competency outside of the classroom structure. Certainly, students perceived it as a useful activity in acquiring cultural content: a full 100% of the class reported that they now have a greater or much greater understanding of current affairs and economics in the French-speaking world. The same percentage said that they would suggest this activity for future sections of the course, indicating strong support for the listening activity. More research in this area would be useful to determine the specific kinds of linguistic progress students actually make, but this small study implies that even the implementation of simple instructional technology outside of class can have beneficial impact on their self-perceptions as speakers of French. Furthermore, the knowledge they gained related to current global economic debates were shared with the class, creating a learner community that included the teacher as well. *Écoutons!*

Deb S. Reisinger
Duke University (NC)
[debsreis@duke.edu]

Figure 2: VoiceThread is a Web-based communications network that allows a user to upload audio or video recordings to a central image or text. See [www.voicethread.com].

Notes

- ¹ Lomicka, Lara and Lara Ducate. “Podcasting: An Effective Tool for Honing Language Students’ Pronunciation?” *Language Learning & Technology*. October 2009. 13.3: 66–86. [http://llt.msu.edu/vol13num3/ducatelomicka.pdf]
- ² As the ACTFL Proficiency guidelines describe, the “vocabulary of Advanced-Low speakers is primarily generic in nature.” Although students are “able to combine and link sentences into connected discourse of paragraph length,” “when pressed for a fuller account, they tend to grope and rely on minimal discourse.” [www.language testing.com/scale.htm#advanced_low]
- ³ These discrepancies in perception are common (see Carolyn Gascoigne Lally, “Discrepancies in Teacher and Student Perceptions of French Language Performance” *The French Review* 75.5 (2002) 926–41.
- ⁴ Studies on anxiety and foreign language have produced varied results, but heightened anxiety is most often linked with lower oral production (see E. Philips “The Effects of Language Anxiety on Students’ Oral Tests.” *Modern Language Journal* 75 (2002) 14–26 and E. Horwitz “Language Anxiety and Achievement” *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics* 21 (2001) 112–126.