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# ***iPods, MP3 Players and Podcasts for FL Learning: Current Practices and Future Considerations***

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**Dolly J. Young**, *The University of Tennessee*

## **Abstract**

iPods, and MP3 players are increasingly common among university students. Not common, however, are the uses of these devices for educational purposes. More specifically, these apparatus, along with their capability to record and podcast, have the potential of changing Foreign Language and Second Language Learning in significant ways. This paper surveys how higher education is currently using iPods, MP3 players, podcasts and podcasting to promote foreign language learning. By examining how these technologies are used, we can apply and increase effective uses and also reveal potential misuses. The author provides a variety of items to consider as the uses of iPods, MP3 players, podcasts and podcasting continue to spread into higher education. Ensuring pedagogically informed tasks and assignments for these new technologies is repeatedly emphasized. To further realistic uses, a questionnaire is provided to encourage action research into the types of language learning tasks students would actually complete using a device meant as a tool for entertainment.

## **Introduction**

One of the most common scenes across American universities and schools is of students with snugly-fit ear phones connected to a small unobtrusive apparatus, most commonly an iPod or some type of MP3 player. When the video iPod debuted over a year ago, followed five months later by a voice recorder specifically designed for the video iPod, my mind began overflowing with ideas of how this small and popular

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**Dolly Jesusita Young** has a B.A. in Spanish, an M.A. in Latin American Studies and a Ph.D. in Foreign Language Education from the University of Texas at Austin. She is currently a full professor and is the Coordinator of the lower-division Spanish program. She trains graduate students in Spanish to teach first- and second-year Spanish courses (of which almost 100 classes are offered each semester). Her research areas include teaching with technology, materials development, second language acquisition, second language reading, processing instruction and the role of affect (language anxiety) in language learning. She has published three readers in three foreign languages, Spanish, French and German; two edited volumes on foreign language anxiety; and a second-year content-oriented, task-based Spanish textbook with such publishing houses as McGraw-Hill, Prentice Hall, Harcourt (now Thompson, Wadsworth, Schirmer and Heinle). She is currently working on a first-year Spanish textbook to be published with John Wiley and Sons in 2009. She has numerous practical and research-oriented publications in refereed journals, such as *The Modern Foreign Language Journal*, *Foreign Language Annals*, *Hispania*, *Applied Language Learning* and *CALICO*.

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*“...the definition of podcasting, for some, continues to evolve...”*

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gadget, particularly with a voice recorder, might enhance foreign language learning (FLL). Almost immediately, I set out to investigate its current uses to inform me about how to effectively employ this technology to enhance FLL further. This quickly led me to the phenomena of podcasts and podcasting.

The present article highlights the results of my investigations and the conclusions I drew from my survey of current research on and practices with these popular devices.

In my search for information about podcasts/podcasting, I became increasingly familiar with the lexicon needed to understand this new technological territory, such as RSS feed (Really Simple Syndication), podders (cross-platform podcast receiver), aggregators (collection of podcasts, a podcast directory, such as [podcastalley.com](http://podcastalley.com) and [podcast.net](http://podcast.net)), time shifting (listening/viewing any time, like TiVo for television programming), and place shifting (listening and watching any place). Yet podcasting is a recent phenomenon with the first reference to it in 2004 (Rainie and Madden, 2005). The combination of “iPod” and “broadcasting” led to the word “podcasting.” Still, the definition of podcasting, for some, continues to evolve (Brittain, Glowacki, Van Ittersum & Johnson, 2006). The best definition I found is “a method of publishing audio and video files, graphics and even Portable Document Format (PDF) to the Internet and making them available for subscription-based downloads to a computer or MP3 [MPEG-I Audio Layer 3] player” (see <http://volcasting.utk.edu>). Subscription audio files are automatically detected by computer software and transferred to an MP3 player, such as an iPod, Zune or Archos, usually via a RSS feed (Rainie and Madden, 2005).

Cognizant of research indicating that a substantive disconnect exists between how students use the Internet for school and at home and how they use it during the school day under the teachers’ directions (see Levin, Arafah, Lehnart & Rainie, 2002), I looked for educational uses of podcasts. Aware of the history of the “no significant difference” phenomenon that is characteristic of Technology Enhanced Language Learning (TELL) (Russel, 1999; Twigg, 2001), I searched for empirically-based studies using iPods/MP3 players, podcasts or podcasting for FLL. Experienced in pedagogies informed by FLL and Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research, I specifically surveyed the pedagogical approaches/tasks educators employed to convey FL material via iPods/MP3 players, podcasts and podcasting. The more I searched for information about these devices and technologies, the more I realized that empirically-based studies were sparse.

## **General Podcast/Podcasting Research**

As I read what was available about podcasts and podcasting in general, I began to understand the attractiveness and potential of these technologies and why they are gaining importance as a phenomenon, as significant, some say, as the Internet. The following list summarizes why podcasts/podcasting will attract an even larger audience (Morales & Moses, 2006) in the future.

- a) Consumers are dissatisfied with radio's lack of diversity and an abundance of commercials.
- b) The tendency of our culture is one of migrating intelligence toward the "edge of the network" (Leigh, 2005, p. 1), currently toward second generation Web or Web 2 and Extensible Markup Language (XML) (HTML displays data; XML describes data, and RSS is an XML – based format for distributing content).
- c) Podcasts offer original programming representing a broader spectrum of voices, designers, perspectives and creators of content.
- d) The sheer popularity of iPods and MP3 players contributes to increasing use and growth.
- e) The expansion of broadband Internet adoptions facilitates speed of delivery.
- f) A high percent (60%) of music listening occurs in the car.
- g) Podcasts offer up-to-date content.
- h) Subscriptions to podcasts are unobtrusive and programs are automatically updated.
- i) The delivery of information aurally addresses issues of learning styles and multiple intelligences.
- j) Learning is self-paced.
- k) Podcasts allow for time shifting (listening or viewing any time).
- l) Podcasts allow for place shifting (listening or viewing any place).
- m) The ease of publication opens up the possibility for even the technologically inexperienced to be successful.
- n) Podcasting can be a creative outlet.
- o) Podcasts permit access to information and programming in areas that are technologically starved, such as in rural areas (Leigh, 2005).

While the use of iPods and MP3 players is common among students, the use of these devices and podcasts/podcasting for educational purposes is still in an infancy stage. The very reasons that make iPods and MP3 players, podcasts and podcasting attractive in general could inform educators regarding how to make educational podcasts appealing.

The most comprehensive information about podcasts and podcasting comes from a project funded by the PEW/Internet & American Life Project (See Raine and Madden, 2005) in which 2,201 people were interviewed in the spring of 2005. Of the 2,201 interviewed, 208 were iPod or MP3 owners. A sample of findings include that 22 million people own an iPod. More men (13%) own them than women (9%), and owners come from higher income households. The report also indicates that minorities (16%) were more likely to own them than whites (9%) (Raine & Madden, April 2005).

Forrester's podcasting report, disseminated via his Blog at <http://blogs.forrester.com>, reports that most consumers are interested in "time-shifting existent radio and Internet radio channels" (p. 2 of 14). This means that they advocate listening to professionally-

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created Internet or broadcast radio, not necessarily to new content. Forrester's research projects that 700,000 households listen to podcasts, but that by 2010, podcast listeners will grow to 12.3 million and that FL instruction is "a great use of podcasts" (p. 2 of 14).

Podcasting Research at <http://peterchen.members.grokthis.net/research> examined the relationship between podcast audience sizes and program profiles. They found that the frequency of broadcasting affects the size of an audience. Daily episodes have the largest audience sizes. Yet, according to these researchers, a variety of unresolved issues still need to be addressed in the area of copyright, policy considerations, gender inequity and definitional inspecificity.

As we design tasks for podcasts and podcasting using iPods and MP3 players for FLL, we may want to consider the findings of podcast and podcasting research that might be applicable to FLL. Frequent revisiting for updates of the general research on these technologies would also be useful as their popularity continues to increase.

## **FLL Research Literature**

A close examination of how schools are currently exploring the diverse uses of iPods/MP3 players and podcasts speaks volumes about how the profession perceives languages are learned. Middlebury College, Duke University and the University of Wisconsin were some of the first schools to explore the uses and effectiveness of iPods, podcasts and podcasting in FLL. The only quasi-empirical study on the effects of using iPods and podcasting that currently exists is the study conducted at Middlebury in 2005. Middlebury College bought 100 iPods with iTalk voice recorders and gave them to one first-year and one second-year Russian class and one first-year Chinese class. The iPods were preloaded with audio files of core vocabulary for Russian students and vocabulary and dialogues for the Chinese students. The students of Russian listened to vocabulary as an audio series of flashcards and the students of Chinese listened to vocabulary in the same format, but in addition listened to recordings of dialogues. They both found that the strongest and weakest students used the iPods and that students reported them useful, but the data also indicated limited FLL success. In fact, based on a questionnaire, students reported listening more to music over academic tasks. The students also reported a preference for authentic (polished) broadcasts, such as advertisements or announcements (See <https://segue.middlebury.edu/sites/achapin-ipod>).

One explanation for the students' reactions at Middlebury College may rest with the type of tasks they were asked to complete. Listening to a series of flashcards of vocabulary words and prefabricated dialogues for the purpose of learning language implies that language learning occurs via dialogue memorization, repetition and decontextualized practice, echos of the Audio Lingual Method (ALM). Moreover, these uses of sophisticated technologies could prove uninteresting, unengaging and downright boring for college students. In short, the pedagogical value of this practice is limited and focuses on short-term memory at best.

Other FL professors at Middlebury, however, explored more creative uses of iPods and podcasts in their FL classes. The following chart describes the various ways iPods/MP3 players, podcasts and podcasting are being used for FLL at Middlebury College, Duke University and The University of Wisconsin.

| <b>School</b>                                                                                                                            | <b>F. L.</b>                           | <b>Level</b>                                                                                                                     | <b>Tasks</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Middlebury College<br>(See <a href="http://segue.middlebury.edu/sites/achapin.ipod">http://segue.middlebury.edu/sites/achapin.ipod</a> ) | Russian                                | First and second-year Russian                                                                                                    | Students listened to a series of flashcard formatted vocabulary words                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
|                                                                                                                                          | Chinese                                | First-year Chinese                                                                                                               | Students listened to a series of flashcard formatted vocabulary words and to prefabricated dialogues                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
|                                                                                                                                          | Spanish                                | Second-year Spanish                                                                                                              | Students recorded descriptions of visuals, such as artwork, and e-mailed the audio files to the instructor who graded them as a speaking component of the class.                                                                                                                                                           |
| Duke University<br>(See <a href="http://cit.duke.edu/ideas/newprofiles/">http://cit.duke.edu/ideas/newprofiles/</a> )                    | Spanish                                | Intermediate level                                                                                                               | Students created their own podcasts in the format of debates, interviews, online discussions and story-telling exercises.                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
|                                                                                                                                          |                                        | Advanced Spanish                                                                                                                 | Students listened to dramatic readings of <i>novelas</i> (novels), required readings in the course, practiced pronunciation, listened to audio exercises, maintained audio diary entries each week, and listened to oral feedback from their professors regarding student quizzes.                                         |
|                                                                                                                                          | Spanish for Health Communication class | Students used iPods to record their observations from their service learning experiences with Spanish-speakers in the community. |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
|                                                                                                                                          | English as a Second Language (ESL)     | Oral Communication class                                                                                                         | Students used iPods as a way to interact with the community and to experience authentic cultures. They conducted interviews in English on the topic of immigration and the maintenance of Hispanic cultural heritage in subsequent generations. The iPods recorded the group discussions for follow-up listening practice. |
|                                                                                                                                          | Italian                                | Intermediate level                                                                                                               | Students subscribed to Italian media sources via podcasts, recorded journal entries, and designed a radio program.                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| Hindi                                                                                                                                    | Advanced level                         | Students used iPods to record samples of Hindi as currently used in the diaspora and then conducted follow-up analyses in class. |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |

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| School                                                                                                                                                                                      | F. L.   | Level              | Tasks                                                                                                                                            |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------|--------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| The University of Wisconsin<br>(See <a href="http://language.institute.wisc.edu/content/uw_students/podcasts.htm">http://language.institute.wisc.edu/content/uw_students/podcasts.htm</a> ) | Spanish | First-year         | Students listened to a series of directions and placed objects in the correct spatial locations on a drawing based on aural instructions.        |
|                                                                                                                                                                                             |         | Intermediate-level | Students listened to current cultural news (short segments) from Spain.                                                                          |
|                                                                                                                                                                                             |         | Advanced-level     | Students listened to a collection of interviews with well-known Hispanic figures on a variety of topics, such as film, music, travel, and music. |

Much of the material on using iPods/MP3 players and podcasts argues that these technologies:

- enable easy recording of lectures, narratives, aural and individual presentations;
- facilitate access to audio books (earworm learning);
- broaden the type of material available, such as subscriptions to music or specific podcasts tailored to individual interests (Morales & Moses, 2006).

## Implications

As I explored the uses (and some misuses) of second-generation technologies for FL learning, I came to the conclusion that just as we consult technologically savvy professionals when investing in research and programs in state-of-the-art technologies for educational purposes, the profession would do well to invest time in readings on current research on SLA, FLL and/or Applied Linguists to inform the creation of tasks/assignments using these technologies. Why? The majority of FL professors and college level instructors have had only one methods class in their entire professional career. Most of their course work is in their major field (literature/linguistics).

Arguably, much more radical change has taken place in media and electronic delivery of content than in literature, linguistics and culture in the past decades. This circumstance alone justifies intensive research into applications of these extremely popular technologies to revolutionize FL instruction.

As we investigate the potential of these innovative technologies, investing some time in updating our knowledge about adult SLA/FLL can also lead to more effective applications of these new technologies. Moreover, in the interest of efficiency and effectiveness, we need to be thinking about the potential uses of iPods podcasts and podcasting for FLL in terms of what purpose the iPod or podcasting tasks/assignments serve and whether this particular technology is the best medium for the task/assign-

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***“...the profession would do well to invest time in readings on current research on SLA, FLL and/or Applied Linguists to inform the creation of tasks/assignments using these technologies.”***

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ment. What are the tasks that will engage and motivate students to listen to a podcast, create a podcast, or invest in the iPod or MP3 player for educational purposes? Students in several of the universities mentioned above did not have to purchase the iPods because they were purchased by the institutions as a way to explore their potential uses. In the future, students may be required to buy one on their own.

To avoid using these technologies ineffectively, designing podcasting tasks or iPod uses informed by what we have learned in SLA and FLL research may increase students' motivation to complete the assignments. Activities that are engaging, problem-solving and task-based, and that encourage authentic self expression for a purpose, are more appealing than listening to mechanical discrete-point verb conjugations or prefabricated audio files.

The next section offers more concrete suggestions and evokes timely considerations as we continue to grow these new technologies. The following list divides podcast and podcasting assignments into communicative and meaningful purposes as a way to guide potential uses of these technologies for FLL in the future.

Uses of iPods/MP3 players, podcasts, and podcasting tasks to promote communicative language use:

- a. "How to" tasks, such as listening to a recipe and then making or cooking the food; or listening to instructions to a game and then playing the game.
- b. Information-gap tasks where some students listen to information that other classmates do not have and vice versa, then students bring their information to class and share it with each other for a specific purpose.
- c. Scavenger hunts where students are given a list of artifacts that they are to acquire at different locations and then take to the FL class for completion of some specified task.
- d. Brain teasers or language-related problems that students must solve.
- e. Student-generated programming, e.g., a radio program.
- f. Audio-narratives written and read by students (stories, poems, movie reviews, etc.).
- g. Student generated audio/video programs, pedagogically-oriented *telenovelas* (soap operas).
- h. Interviews.
- i. Content lectures, e.g., art with visuals...

Use of iPod/MP3 players, podcasts and podcasting tasks to promote meaningful uses of the FL:

- a. Games, such as Concentration/Jeopardy.
- b. Dictation followed by comprehension tasks.
- c. Audio passages that use vocabulary and structures in contexts and with images.
- d. Authentic broadcasts with pedagogical follow-ups.

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***“What are the tasks that will engage and motivate students to listen to a podcast, create a podcast, or invest in the iPod or MP3 player for educational purposes?”***

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- e. Grammar explanations with texts and pedagogical follow-up.
- f. Cloze tasks with music.
- g. Role-playing by recording parts followed by comprehensions questions.
- h. Vocabulary learning via images and questions or correct and incorrect definitions.

While these examples are not exhaustive, they may offer a glimpse into one way of thinking about using these technologies for FLL. Most SLA/FLL/Applied Linguists would strongly discourage using these technologies for memorizing dialogs or rote practice of verb conjugations. These promote mechanical and short-term solutions to a complex and long-term process.

Program administrators and instructors could complement in-class goals with out-of-class support, e.g., if in-class activities encourage negotiation of meaning and structured output tasks, then perhaps out-of-class tasks can emphasize comprehensible intake tasks via podcasts or iPod uses.

Most importantly, we may want to gather data on the students' perspectives regarding what they might listen to or watch on an iPod or MP3 player. I have summarized the various uses found to date into a list of questions that may be molded into a questionnaire (see Appendix A). I added a few of my own ideas about how we might use these tools for enhancing FLL. Teachers may modify, add or delete items, and then administer the questionnaire to their own students through action research that can inform the effectiveness of each of the uses and also inform future material development.

Lastly, in the short period of time that podcasts and podcasting have become an educational tool, podcasts have spread enormously. Not all podcasts can be used for educational purposes but instructors can peruse podcasts for FL and SL learning via some established sites. Bob Peckam's (2006) *Globe-Gate: A Culture and Language Supersite* houses a vast collection of educational FLL websites that also provide podcasts, such as the ones below.

Podcasting for Foreign-Language Education

<http://www.tm.edu/staff/globeg/flpodcasting.html>

About.com — Learn a Language with Podcasts

[http://mp3.about.com/od/podcasting/a/language\\_pcasts.htm](http://mp3.about.com/od/podcasting/a/language_pcasts.htm)

Free Language (for education and news)

<http://freelanguage.org/>

Podcasting.net — International Podcasts

<http://www.podcast.net/cat/89>

The PiECast — Language learning podcast from Partners in Excellence

<http://www.podcast.net/show/8715>

Globe-Gate CALL Research Center

[http://globegate.utm.edu/french/globegate\\_mirror/call.html](http://globegate.utm.edu/french/globegate_mirror/call.html).

To produce original podcasts, I found a detailed and step-by-step explanation to podcasting at <http://www.podcasting-tools.com/how-to-podcast.htm>, but many more are available by googling "How to podcast." More and more schools will facilitate

podcasting by making it increasingly user friendly. For example, to podcast for classes at The University of Tennessee, we create an audio file via Audacity (free audio-recording program easily downloaded) and export the file as an MP3 file. Then we go to <http://volcasting.utk.edu> and click "upload file" to a class site that has already been created (per request from instructor). The simpler the process of podcasting becomes, the more motivated faculty will be to do it.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this article was to provide information to FL professionals on how iPods and MP3 players, podcasts and podcasting have been used for FLL to date for the specific purpose of informing potential and future uses. We may want to think, however, of additional uses of podcasts and podcasting, such as for learning-disabled language learners, professional development, teacher training, and the dissemination of research in SLA and FL learning. For example, for a while, the College of Charleston offered five-minute podcasts on significant topics in linguistics, SLA and FL learning. Apparently these were popular enough to transform into commercial CDs and a book (Holton & Rickerson's *The Five-Minute Linguist*) and are no longer online. Recently, the Center for Advanced Language Proficiency Education and Research (CALPER) (See <http://calper.la.psu.edu/podcast.php>) also began offering a podcast series. The potential of these technologies is exciting, but the need for empirically-based research on their effectiveness is crucial. In the meantime, these new technologies, along with other educational software, like Elluminate (live eLearning software), have the potential to revolutionize FL learning in the near future.

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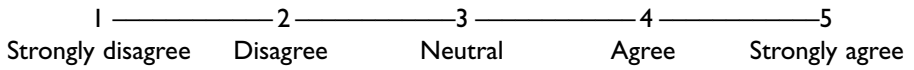
The University of Wisconsin Language Institute Website: [http://languageinstitute.wisc.edu/content/uw\\_students/podcasts.htm](http://languageinstitute.wisc.edu/content/uw_students/podcasts.htm)

## Appendix A

### iPods, MP3 players and Podcasting; Student Perspectives

What would you as a student actually download to your iPod or MP3 player to help you learn a foreign language? Often times academicians, publishers, and textbook writers assume to know what students need but may be out of touch with what they will actually use. Please respond to each statement as honestly as possible. Your responses will help forge improved quality material for language learning.

On a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), respond to the following statements.



1. I would listen to pop songs in the foreign language.
2. I would listen to songs with video images in the FL.
3. I would listen to new FL words used in sentences that illustrate their meaning.
4. I would listen to a reading offering cultural information.
5. I would play concentration to learn vocabulary on the video iPod.
6. I would listen to instructions in the FL and then execute them, such as someone giving me directions so I can end up at a specified location.
7. I would listen to questions in the FL that I would then answer with a voice recorder and send to my instructor for feedback.

8. I would listen to the conjugations of irregular preterits presented in 5-minute segments.
9. I would listen to pronunciation exercises followed by pronunciation practice.
10. I would watch a *telenovela* (soap operas) in the FL on the iPod video.
11. I would listen to authentic broadcasts of news, advertisements, announcements (such as airport announcements) followed by specific tasks.
12. I would listen to personal diary entries from my instructor.
13. I would listen to personal diary entries from my classmates.
14. I would listen to brainteasers, jokes, trivial pursuit type material that would make me figure something out.
15. I would help create a class-derived radio program and podcast it.
16. I would describe paintings, scenes, or artwork with the voice recorder and then as a class analyze the language.
17. I would interview people with a voice recorder and podcast the interview for classmates to discuss.
18. I would participate in a skit, short play or some type of dramatic production that is videotaped and then podcasted.
19. I would subscribe to free authentic FL podcast programs of my choice and interest.
20. I would listen to educational podcasts, such as lectures about historical figures, social issues or politics of a specific culture.
21. I would listen to a video replay of my FL class.
22. I would listen to an audio replay of my FL class.