Article

A Podcast Project in the German Programme of the University of Canterbury, New Zealand

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Abstract

This study aims to contribute to the research into the design of language podcasts. It describes the design of the podcasts used and analyses the results of a questionnaire and discusses podcast design for future language learning.

During one 12-week semester, podcasts were used in a German language intermediate class to improve student listening skills. New Zealand is a long way from a German-speaking country; besides being a good way to bring authentic L2 material into the classroom, we envisaged podcasts on student iPods would also be a good way to take language learning out of the classroom and integrate it into daily life. Podcasts might become part of a series of web tools, which support the teaching goal: improved learning outcomes by making the students part of a web community.

Keywords: Podcasts, L2 teaching, independent learners, MP3, CALL integration.

1. Introduction

Podcasts are a relatively new phenomenon. The word itself is a combination of iPod and broadcast. The downloadable multimedia files can be either in audio or video format. They are distinct from the traditional online multimedia because they are freely subscribable via an RSS feed (see glossary). Podcasting is an asynchronous mode of distributing multimedia files. Podcasts are often used in university education to simply broadcast lectures, but have great potential as a highly mobile learning tool.

The project was based on the hypothesis that there is value in creating audio and video podcasts that supplement in-class teaching, so that mobile learning can occur in a "hands-free" mobile situation to enable students to learn during activities such as gym sessions or commuting.

In order to evaluate the value of such hypothesis, podcasts were used in language classes to support learners of German to improve their listening and comprehension skills. In the end of the project the students were surveyed in order to find out about their preferences of the podcast design.

In the following section, the literature about podcasts is reviewed. It is followed by the description of the project and the survey and a discussion of its interpretation.

2. Literature review

2.1. Podcasts as a tool for teaching and learning

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Podcasting was first introduced in July 2003 (Doyle 2005); the first RSS audio feeds produced for American radio appeared in July 2003 and by mid-2005 there were approximately 10,000 different podcasts available on a wide range of topics. In June 2005 Apple added podcasting to their free "iTunes" programme.

Early literature on podcasting in tertiary teaching reflects the fact that podcasts were simply recordings of lectures for students unable to attend classes or for revision work. Lim (2006) used podcasts in his Geography classes. He recorded lectures but also authorized the learners by making their own podcasts. He predicts that "the technology will draw enthusiasm among teachers and learners".

To evaluate the potential of podcasts to supplement lectures, the University of Canterbury Computing Department ran a podcasting experiment for two first-year Computer Science courses in 2006, (T. Bell, A. Cockburn, A. Wingkvist & R. Green 2007). Weekly podcasts were released that supplemented the lectures rather than recorded them in their entirety.

Fietke (2009) also used lecture podcasts in his economics classes but he identifies the need for more knowledge about the usage of recorded lectures in higher education.

2.2. Podcasts in language learning environments

Podcasting is a powerful tool to improve and enrich the understanding of the spoken target language in a language learning environment. The many advantages of iPods and podcasts are described in Morales and Moses (2006). Features like: "students learn at their own pace", "listen to the podcasts [...] as many times as they want, which gives advantages to a mixed ability group and encourages weaker learners to improve on the language skills". However, among the many advantages of podcasts there also lie disadvantages, such as the slight danger of addiction to digital technology, as mentioned in Windham (2007).

As early as 2005, wealthier institutions like Duke University distributed iPods to students in many different subject areas, including a German language beginner's class and a Turkish language class. The use of the iPods was evaluated in different categories: as a course content tool, a classroom recording tool, a field recording tool, a study support tool, and as a file transfer and storage tool (Belanger, 2005). The evaluation described by Belanger offered a general overview of the use of the iPods as a new technology, but did not evaluate improved learning of a foreign language.

Rossell-Aguilar (2009) saw podcasting as a tool to integrate learning in the personal life of the learners. Other researchers started to use and assess podcasts as a language teaching tool. Lord (2008) and Ducate and Lomicka (2009) used podcasts to improve pronunciation. The result of their project suggested "that podcasting and repeated recordings alone are not enough to improve pronunciation over one academic semester".

Stanley (2006) suggests podcasts could be used as a supplement to textbook materials; a source for authentic listening materials; a way for students to gain information on specific aspects of the language, such as idiomatic expressions or grammatical constructions and; with student-produced podcasts, as a way for students to communicate with each other in other countries.

Manning (2005) pointed out that podcasts have the value of voice in a traditionally text-heavy instruction world and she emphasizes the positive effects podcasts would possibly have on the more auditory-focused learner. She also commented on the different learner types and includes the visual learners.

Crispin et al. (2009) pointed out that "this type of learning enables the separation of tutor and student from the traditional place of learning", and they note that institutions need devices and infrastructure for that change. They also point out that vodcasting (podcasts including videos) and podcasting is a new way of creative and personalized learning. And Kuskulta-Hulme et al. (2009) note that mobile devices are an authentic follow-up tool for fixed devices and that mobile learning interweaves with the learners' personal life. Thorne and Payne (2005) suggest that podcasts can be used to provide learners with samples of real speech and other authentic materials.

My research accepts the hypothesis that learners will improve their listening skills by using podcasts. Facer et al. (2009) see listening skills as the hardest part of language acquisition. The focus of this paper is the design of effective podcasts and their use in language teaching.

The application of podcasts in a language course will be described. There is no doubt that podcast technology is of benefit for the language student, the question remains however to what extend this technology should be used in a language environment. This project wants to determine the best possible design of podcasts/vodcasts in language learning classes and it examines students' perception of the new technology. Developing an understanding of the effect on learning and teaching with podcasts will be a continuation of the project described in this article.

3. The podcast project at the German programme, UC Christchurch

Part of the motivation to use podcasts in my German language classes had been the geographical distance of New Zealand to the country of the spoken target language. Podcasts can bring the authentic L2 environment into the classroom and beyond.

3.1. Participants

Twenty six students of the German 251 intermediate class took part in a trial of three different types of podcasts. The intermediate level consists of different learner abilities. Some students had spent from a few months to up to a year in a German speaking country. Other students had 5 years of German in High School. And about a third of the learners had never been to Germany and had started to learn German at University for one year before they started in the intermediate stream. The students ranged in age between 18 and 21 years. The period of the investigation was one semester (12 weeks). All podcasts were part of the student assessment.

The results of 20 students were evaluated. The remaining students did not answer the survey.

3.2. Materials

Two different types of podcasts were used.

A) Audio Podcasts

Audio podcasts were produced by the instructor and uploaded to a University site and automatically transferred onto iTunes.

The audio podcasts are a "series of regularly updated media files that can be played on a number of devices (portable or static) and are distributed over the Internet via a subscription service" (iTunes), (Rosell-Aguilar, 2009). The finished podcasts were downloadable from iTunes or the university's UCTV service. The students were encouraged to subscribe via RSS feed (Stanley, 2006). The audio podcasts produced by the instructor were part of the fortnightly homework sheet. The learners were students

of the German intermediate class GRMN 251. McQuillan (2006) finds audio use of iPods was particularly powerful for intermediate learners.

Evaluation

The audio podcasts were part of five homework assignments, which counted 10% to the final mark. Five podcasts were produced over a period of two terms (12 weeks). The topics of each 3-5 minute episode complemented the topics in the textbook. The instructor's voice was present in each podcast; and the interviewees changed in each podcast. The regular exposure to the instructor's voice aimed to enable the students to better understand spoken German in the classroom. The second speakers came from different dialect areas of Germany, Switzerland, and Austria, thereby aiming to widen the listening understanding of the learner. Heidi Byrnes (2007) notes the advantage of the close relationship of culture and foreign language. A questionnaire was handed out in the end of the learning period and a primarily quantitative method was used for the evaluation. This is analysed in section 5.1 below. (1)

Figure 1. Sample podcast from GRMN 251/252. For access to the complete 15 podcasts, click HERE.

B) Video Podcasts

Video podcasts are also called vodcasts. Sutton-Brady (2009) defines them as video and podcasts combined and Rossell-Aguilar (2007) predicted that video podcasts were likely to be as accessible as audio podcasts. The later version iPods have a screen big enough to watch videos. For more technical advice about vodcasts, see Meng (2007). The video podcasts were downloaded from the iTunes library using RSS feeds.

Evaluation

As part of the overall assessment the students were asked to choose a German podcast episode from the iTunes podcast shop. The length of the exercise was one semester (12 weeks). Instructions were given about what type of podcast was adequate and a few suggestions of popular podcast series were given by the instructor (see appendix 2). The students were instructed to use the iTunes podcasts, which are free and don't disadvantage financially poorer students (Rossell-Aguilar, 2007). The introduction took 50 minutes in the university computer lab.

In order to gain 10 percent towards the final mark, the students had to set up the RSS feed for their chosen podcast. They had to write an introductory comment on an intranet blog forum, introducing themselves and explaining their choice of podcasts. The students were asked to comment on eight different episodes, using at least 50 words each time. The comments had to be posted to the blog forum. (2)

At the end of the semester and after the 8 comments the students had to write a 270-word report on different aspects of their podcast use (see appendix 3). (3) The report was graded and was used as the qualitative evaluation (Edrisingha et.al, 2007). This is analysed in section 5.2.

3.3. Design

The instructor-produced podcasts were made using Garageband on a Macbook computer. There was no need for a microphone, the quality of the internal microphone of the computer was sufficient.

4. Research Methods

The students were exposed to two different types of podcasts. Because of the different nature of those podcasts, different research methods were applied.

The audio podcasts produced by the instructor were surveyed by a questionnaire. The students had five homework assignments; each one included an audio podcast produced by the instructor. The students were asked to fill out a survey sheet after completing the last assignment. The seven survey questions were multiple choice except for number five which was open ended. The data analysis was mainly quantitative. Graphs were used to show the results of the students' preferences.

The video podcast assignment was analysed using the qualitative method. The students had to write a report after completing the task. The researcher is aware of the relatively small number of students. The data from the reports was analysed and then summarised.
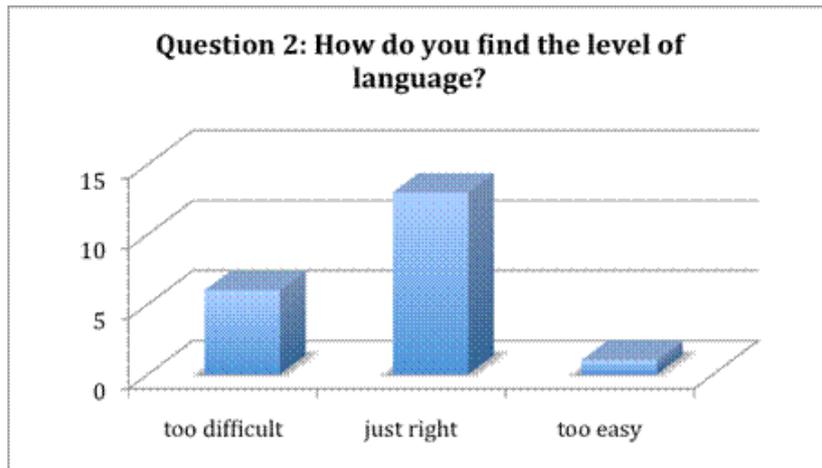
## 5. Results

5.1. Audio podcasts by the instructor

The majority of answers were in favour of the podcasts.
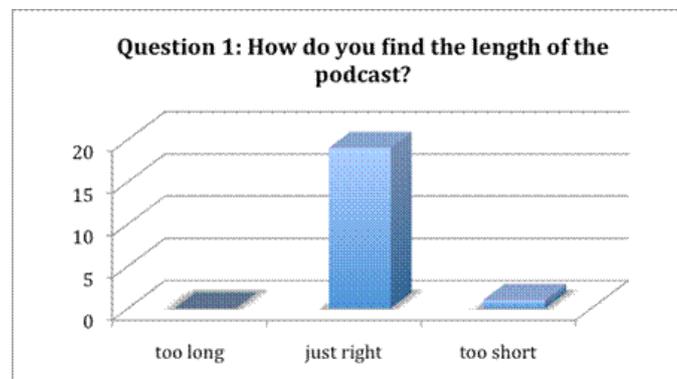
Q1: 4-6 minutes length seems to be ideal for this language level. Sutton-Brady (2009) mentions that short podcasts are the most successful.

**Question 2: How do you find the level of language?**

Q2: The intermediate students found it difficult to listen to the podcasts from the iTunes shop. The instructor podcasts were spoken in a slower pace and with vocabulary carefully chosen. The idea behind this was to put students at ease particularly if they had not had much exposure to spoken German. One third of the students still found the level of language too difficult. This was a positive response because the level has to be slightly difficult in order to motivate and give the student the positive feeling when he/she achieved the task.

Question 3: How do you find the questions/ answers for the podcasts?
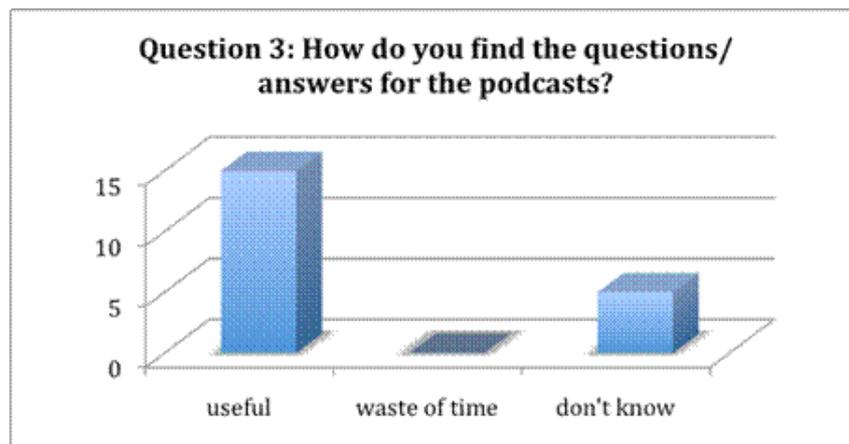
Q3: The homework task was to answer questions after listening to the instructor's podcast episode. The answers were meant to improve listening comprehension and not to confuse him/her by making it too difficult. The balance between questions and podcasts was assessed. Most of the students answered in favour of having questions about the podcasts.

Students commented: The questions are good as they help me be more specific in understanding what I am hearing instead of just getting the main idea like I usually do. It makes the students more focused on the contents.

Question 4: Would you prefer to have the script for each podcast?
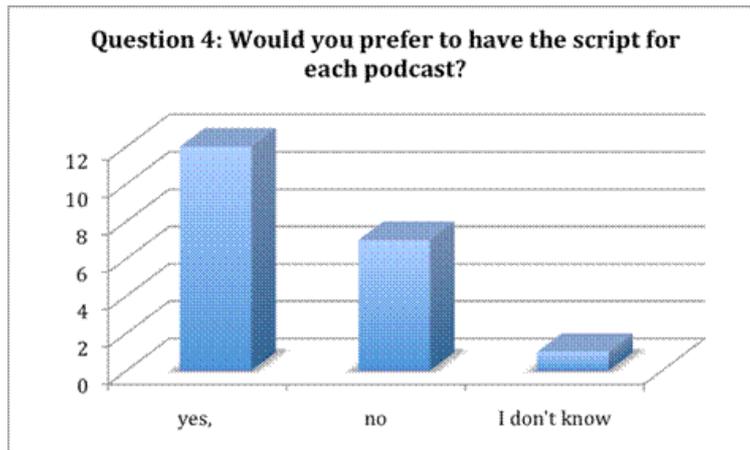
Q4: A surprising number of students answered with "no". It was expected that the students would prefer the script. This could be a positive outcome and might show the ease the students have when having the podcasts at home and not in class. It could also mean that the level of difficulty is too low and they do not need the script.

Q5: An open-ended question was asked: "Do you like podcasts as an assessment tool". The majority answered yes.

Some of the comments were:

- Good way for improving listening skills.
- It helps with listening and comprehension.
- Different types of homework is great. Podcasts are fun, you can choose what you want to listen to.
- Great with the different dialects.
- It's fun using technology.
- The more spoken German one hears the more one absorbs.
- Listening and training my ear is one of the hardest aspects of learning a language – the more practice the better!

Question 6: What would you prefer?
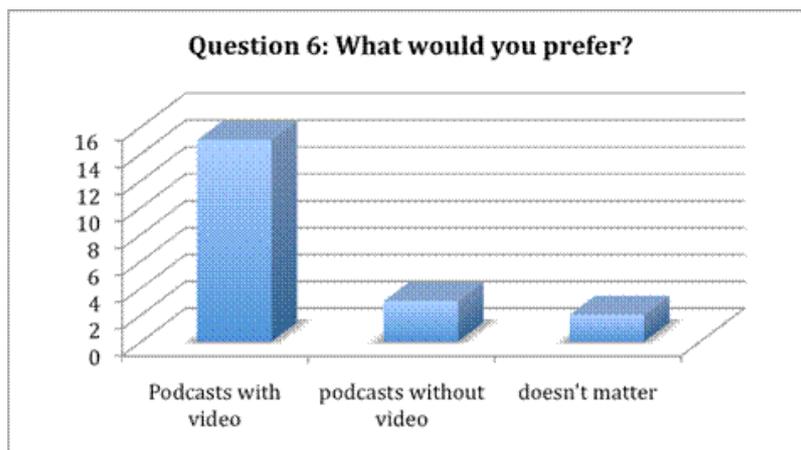
Q6: The majority of students would prefer a video podcast, vodcast.

Audio format (McQuillan, 2006) was deliberately chosen to train the ear of the learners and to make it possible for all students to download the podcasts, even if the students didn't have the latest technology.

5.2. Video Podcasts

iTunes Video podcast episodes (following 3.2.) were perceived as a very valuable part of their overall assessment.

Some comments from the final report:

- Es war hilfreich, dass ich Deutsch lernte durch Anschauen von Videos, das machte Spass. (It was helpful, that I learned German by watching videos, that was fun.)
- Meiner Meinung nach ist diese Podcastaufgabe wirklich toll. (According to my opinion this podcast assignent is great.)

Surprisingly few students used the podcasts as a mobile, hands free entertainment. They perceived it as an educational exercise, asked after their listening strategy:

- Meine Hörstrategie war, sie zwei oder dreimal zu hören. (My listening strategy was to listen to them 2 or 3 times.)
- Das zweite Mal stoppe ich das Podcast, wenn ich ein wichtiges Wort nicht verstehn kann. (The second time I stop the podcast when I can't understand an important word.)

Those last two comments show that the aim of total immersion into the target language wasn't fulfilled.

6. Discussion

The feedback of this questionnaire is encouraging for the instructor. The results of the qualitative and quantitative methods clearly showed that the students liked the podcasts. By giving the students the option to take learning home, the learning environment becomes more authentic and not as formal as the computer lab. Edirisinha *et al* (2007) also considered podcasting useful for the students; it brought a sense of informality into academic learning. Using the podcasts as part of the overall course assessment, students were more motivated. It was important to set up the podcast learning in the first week of term. The knowledge of IT varied in the class and it was important to set up the students to be able to start on the same level. A disappointing finding in this study was that the students are not accepting podcasts fully into their personal everyday life. The quote "Students are digital natives" (Prensky, 2001) seems not to be fully applicable! The students are still approaching podcasts with awe and listen to them with concentration on their home computers. They do not listen to them in a leisurely way on their personal iPods. Sutton-Brady (2009) found the same result: her students liked and used their iPods but not for language learning tasks.

The design of the home-produced podcasts seem to be appropriate for the second year German class. There might be an indication that the level is slightly too low. It should be considered in future to make the podcasts more difficult to take the students out of their comfort zone. The preference for video podcasts seems interesting. Although learners are usually mixed learners, the majority tends to be visually orientated.

7. Conclusion

Two problems might be mentioned. Levy and Stockwell (2007) note that instructors who use CALL elements in the classroom need to have a clear idea of what they want to achieve. Making audio or video podcasts to enrich the language learning environment alone is not beneficial; it needs to have the appropriate design to engage the interest of students.

The other problem might be that students will not attend classes any longer if teaching extends outside the classroom (Blaidsell, 2005). Classroom teaching should not be replaced! (Morales & Moses, 2006). CALL elements are still too dependent on the enthusiasm of the individual language instructor and the success depends on the involvement of the instructor (Chapelle, 2003). The creation of audio files in particular is getting easier every year which should encourage the even less technology savvy instructor.

Future podcast use or the application of similar technology may be guaranteed if language teacher education focused more on developing the technical abilities of instructors. The development of hardware and software will no doubt make producing additional computer material more manageable and will facilitate increased use of computer components in language classes.

To gain more information on the impact of podcasts, research on the way students master listening and how it correlates with their oral performance would be of interest. Future research should survey different learner groups. Ideally there would be a parallel scenario with one group taught the traditional/ conventional way and the other group with the podcasts integrated in their teaching.

Glossary

CALL = Computer-Assisted Language Learning

Podcast = A podcast is a series of digital media files (either audio or video) that are released episodically and often downloaded through web syndication.

RSS = RSS (most commonly expanded as "Really Simple Syndication") is a family of web feed formats used to publish frequently updated works —such as blog entries, news headlines, audio, and video— in a standardized format.

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Appendix 1

Questionnaire

Podcasts GRMN251: a series of podcasts produced fortnightly and published on UCTV and iTunes. The topics of the podcasts are complimentary material to the course textbooks "Passwort 3 and 4".

How do you find the length of the podcasts?

- too long
- just right
- too short

How do you find the level of language?

- too difficult
- just right
- too easy

How do you find the questions/answers for the podcasts?

- It is useful for the understanding of the podcasts.
- It's a waste of time, I understand the podcasts' contents anyway.
- Don't know, it doesn't matter if there are questions/answers or not.

Do you prefer to have the script of each podcast?

- Yes, that would be great!
- Not really, it trains my ear better to listen without a script.
- I don't know.

Do you think the podcast is a good tool as part for the assessment in GRMN 251?

- Yes, why?:
- No, why?:

Would you prefer?

- Podcasts with video
- Podcasts without videos

What are the areas you think you need to improve in German?

- spoken German
- listening skills
- written German
- understanding of longer texts

Appendix 2

Instructions iTunes and blog

Podcasts

There are two different types of podcasts in Grmn 251. Both will be part of your overall assessment.

Podcast type A – audio = in house produced podcasts / Arbeitsblätter

There are 12 podcasts available especially produced for GRMN 251/252. They can be downloaded either directly from UCTV or iTunes.

A selection of those podcasts are part of the fortnightly 'Arbeitsblätter'.

Each podcast includes a short conversation about a place in Germany which complements the topics in the textbook. The voices on the podcasts are usually two people, one of them is the instructor of the course and the other voice is a different native German speaker each time. The idea behind the podcasts is to familiarize the student with the voice of the instructor plus German voices with a variety of local accents. The podcasts contain only audio, no video files, they focus on the aural understanding of German.

How to download:

- Go into the UCTV website: uctv.canterbury.ac.nz/1/170
- Go to RSS (right hand side of page)
- Rightclick: 'copy link'
- Open iTunes
- Go to 'advanced': 'subscribe to podcast'

You now can download the podcasts on your mp3 player!

Podcasts type B - video = free German podcasts in iTunes Shop / final mark

"iTunes store German" has got a wide variety of German podcasts which can be downloaded for free.

You need to access the iTunes store, choose a video podcast of your choice and subscribe to it.

You need to watch one episode per week (starting week 2 and ending week 9, a total of 8 episodes).

After watching each episode you need to go into Learn/Moodle, go into Forum and comment on the episode. The comment needs to be in German. The instructor won't correct the German, only the length (minimum of 50 words) and the contents of the comment (description of what you have watched) will be considered. Each comment will be 0.5 % = 4 % of your final mark.

After you have finished the last episode you need to write a report including:

1. A description of your chosen podcast.
2. Your review: was it good, bad, interesting,…
3. Explaining your listening strategy: when did you watch the podcasts, what device did you use, how often did you listen to each episode,…?

Minimum length: one A4 page, 270 words, double lined. Due date 14 May 2010.

The final report will count 6% towards the final grade and will be marked like an essay.

Einige Vorschläge:

- Die Sendung mit der Maus
- Gallileo
- Tagesschau
- Käpt'n Blaubär

Appendix 3

Sample of student's podcast report (copied with permission)

Beschreibung der Podcast

Ich habe beschlossen, den Podcast «KultureSofa» anzuhoeren, weil ich mich fuer andere Kulture interessiere und besser verstehen moechte, wie man integriert in der deutschen Gesellschaft wird. Es wird oft gesagt, dass Deutschland ein multikulturelles Land sei und ich moechte wissen warum es so vielen verschiedenen Nationalitaeten gefaellt.

Der Podcast besteht aus einen Interview mit einem fremden „Deutshe". Ich hatte ein besseres Verstaendnis mit den „Deutscher", die aus Australien kamen, weil sie die gleiche Unterschiede wie ich bemerkt haben, als ich in Europa war. Zum Beispiel gewoehnt man sich nicht an ein grosses Mittagessen, sondern an ein grosses Abendessen, wie hier in Neuseeland. Also fuer beide Laender ist Deutschland total anders. Fuer die Leute aus Spanien gab es kein Unterschied mit dem Essen (ausser den Wuersten!) , sondern ein klares Unterschied mit der Sprache. Im Allgemein fuer die Jugendliche war dieses Problem nicht so gross, weil sie Deutsch in der Schule lernen mussten. Aber fuer die Mutter oder die Grosseltern, die zu Hause bleiben, ist dieses Kommunikationsproblem immer groesser geworden.

Es hat Spass gemacht, die Podcasts anzuhoeren, weil sie ihre persoenliche Erlebnis mit uns teilen haben. Durch sie habe ich viele interessante Tipps gelernt und ich moechte daran erinnern, wenn ich nach Deutschland reise. Ich wuerde dieser Podcast empfehlen, wenn man sein Sprach- oder Kulturkenntnis von Deutschland verbessen will. Obwohl die Auslaender ziemlich starke Akzente hatten, sprachen alle fliessig Deutsch. Ich habe es zweimal in der Woche anzuhoert und es hat mich ein bisschen geholfen, Deutsch zu sprechen. Immer wenn ich etwas in der Podcast nicht verstehen konnte, hatte ich es wiederholen. Je mehr ich die Podcasts anhoere, desto leichter wird die Sprache! Ich glaube, dass die Podcasts besonderes „KultureSofa" ganz hilfreich sind und ich habe keine Zweifel, dass jetzt ich mehr Deutsch verstehen kann!!!

Notes

[1] I also used audio podcasts produced by the learners as their end-of-year oral exam. After having had podcast exposure for half a year, the students were asked to produce part of their end-of-year oral exam as a podcast episode. The better podcasts were shared on a publicly available website created by the instructor

(http://web.me.com/veraleier/251_2Oral/Herzlich_Willkommen.html). The instructions for the podcasts were clearly explained (see appendix 2). See Levy (2007) about the importance of explaining CALL components well to the learners. The students had to pair up with a classmate and record the podcast onto Garageband. The topic was to present information on a part of Germany, which was less well known than some more famous areas. The instructor announced the topic one day in advance. The students were allowed to use notes while producing the podcast but not scripts. The podcast was part of the oral assessment and counted 20 percent towards the final mark. A comparative analysis was used by comparing the normal face-to-face oral exam from the previous year with the new podcast recordings. The marking schedule was the same as for the conventional oral exam. A total of 20 marks, comprising of 7 marks for pronunciation, 7 marks for grammatical correctness, and 6 marks on ability in using complex language. The outcome of this research is not yet completed and will be presented in a later article.

[2] The idea of group membership of a forum is an important part of the design (McQuillan, 2006).

[3] A particular focus was on the question: Explain your listening strategy: when did you watch the podcasts, what device did you use, how often did you listen to each episode,…?