USING IPODS IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING

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Rezumat: În articol se discută posibilitățile de integrare a formei de învățare „mobile learning" în curricula limbii engleze, bazîndu-se pe proiecte de cercetare efectuate la nivel de universitate. Se propun posibilități de utilizare a iPod-ului cu scopul de a integra activități de audiere și de îmbunătățire a procesului de învățare a limbii engleze. Studiul relevă necesitatea de a reconsidera competențele de utilizare a tehnologiilor informaționale ale unui profesor de limba engleză și descrie competențele necesare pentru a folosi iPod-ul în procesul de predare a limbilor. În articol, se aduc exemple de itemi și activități prin intermediul cărora iTunes poate fi integrat în cursul de limbă engleză și se specifică beneficiile acestei integrări.

Cuvinte-cheie: iPod Touch, iTunes, predarea limbii engleze, abilități de audiere, podcasts.

Abstract: This article discusses attempts to integrate mobile learning into the English language curriculum, relying on research projects undertaken at the university level. It contributes with research concerning the use of iPod units and the possibilities that come with it in integrating listening activities into a language course and in supporting the English language teaching and learning process. The study reveals how the research led to reconsidering the English language teacher's Information Technology competencies and enlists the key competences required to use the iPod units in language teaching. It gives examples of English language courses, tasks, and activities where iTunes content was integrated and points out the outcomes for both the teachers and the students undertaking such activities.

Keywords: iPod Touch, iTunes, English Language Teaching, Listening skills, podcasts.

In many classroom settings around the world, a great number of English language teachers have limited teaching resources and usually rely on the blackboard and the course book in order to hold a language course. Therefore, there is a clear need and demand to integrate listening activities in the English language curriculum. In this context, a small project was initiated to pursue individual research on integrating listening activities in university courses. As a starting point, it was important to assess the learners' needs, identify the learners' English language learning resources and find out what they can bring to the course. Taken into consideration the fact that many students own an iPhone, it was interesting to search for opportunities to integrate listening activities in their English language classes using iPhone and iPod units. In this context, it was important to explore how to use the iTunes application to download and select podcasts, sync content on an iPhone or iPod and integrate content from iTunes into the university courses.

The research project focused on the use of the iPod Touch for educational purposes in settings where learners are not provided with wireless access to the Internet. It focused on English language teaching via iPod units, relying on the possibility to download files with iTunes and sync content on an iPod or iPhone. Thus, new Information Technology competencies were derived from this activity and might be included in the profile of an English language teacher.

As the iPod units are developing and new opportunities are available with each new version, the current article will also bring an insight onto what iPod features/functions can be used for English language teaching purposes, providing the researchers and the iPod producer with some feedback about the difference an iPod unit makes in some classroom settings.

Technology is evolving rapidly. Nowadays many users enjoy using wikis, blogs, virtual reality, and mobile technologies for personal purposes while educational institutions still face a lot of technology challenges. More and more English language teachers, for example, rely on their own laptop or a student's laptop if they want to integrate Internet-based resources into their English language curriculum because the EL classroom is not adequately equipped. Integrating listening into English language classes is a challenging task in such settings. In this context, mobile learning could become an alternative for students from the Republic of Moldova because more and more of them own an iPhone. A research activity

was undertaken as part of the project „Future English Language Teachers' School", which is implemented by the association „Continuing Education Center" in partnership with A. Russo Balti State University. [1] It was aimed to explore how to use iTunes and iPod devices in different optional courses available at the university level. Thus, the teacher is expected to acquire new knowledge in order to use this technique in English language teaching.

A brief presentation of the iPod device and explanation of key terms are used here to facilitate understanding of the issue under discussion and support the attempt to integrate the iPod-based listening activities into a variety of English language or/and literature courses.

The iPod Touch is a portable media player, personal digital assistant, and Wi-Fi mobile platform designed and marketed by Apple Inc. „The iPod Touch adds the multi-touch graphical user interface to the iPod line. It is the first iPod with wireless access to the iTunes Store, and also has access to Apple's App Store, enabling content to be purchased and downloaded directly on the device." [2]

„iTunes is a proprietary digital media player application, used for playing and organizing digital music and video files. The application is also an interface to manage the contents on Apple's popular iPod and other digital media players such as the iPhone and iPad."[3] iTunes is available as a free download for Mac OS X v10.4 or later and Windows XP or later from Apple's website and is available in both British and American English. Besides this basic knowledge about iPod touch and iTunes, the teacher needs to inform himself or herself about the terms and conditions of using iTunes and be familiar with „its terms of service, system requirements, information about user account and security, usage rules" etc. [4]

Using iPods in English language teaching also encourages the teacher to build or develop new computer skills. Taking into consideration the purpose of our study, the following Information Technology competences are suggested to be added to an English language teacher's profile. Teachers should be able to organize their audio files into playlists within one or more libraries, edit file informa-tion, copy files to a digital audio player, encode audio recordings into a number of different audio formats (optional), download podcasts and other audio or video files, subscribe to podcasts, add the lyrics to the songs or the scripts to the dialogues from a podcast, sync content on an iPod touch, browse the iTunes Store by category (Education, for example) and select different applications like grammar books, lessons and tests, or browse the podcast directory within iTunes Store, and use iTunes U to search for different university courses, lectures and supplementary material for the students.

As iTunes is primarily used for downloading music, but at the same time it is an application that allows the user to manage audio and video on a personal computer, initially this application was used to update the course „English Language Teaching through Songs" using the opportunity to download songs, create playlists, add the lyrics of the songs and sync them to the iPod Touch. This led to the first attempts to identify the competencies needed to carry out mobile learning activities in an English language class.

The teacher carefully selected the collection of songs following the course objectives. An example of such a compilation is the „Christmas Songs Collection", „St. Valentine's Day Collection of Love Songs", „Children's Songs" etc. If the collection „Children's Songs" was based on resources like tapes and CDs from English language course books and could not be saved in a database without the written permission of the authors, then the „Christmas Songs Collection" was organized as a playlist in iTunes because many songs were available for download and had been downloaded from different web sites. Additionally, the teacher downloaded or sometimes typed the lyrics and added them on the iPod Touch.

Usually the lyrics can be found on line, and it is easy to copy them. After this the teacher must open the iTunes library, right click the song that he/she wants to add lyrics to, click „Get info", then click „Lyrics" and paste the copied lyrics in the blank space. The teacher plugs the iPod into the computer and ITunes will automatically synchronize its content with the iPod. Then, he/she plays the song on the iPod, taps the screen while the song is playing and the lyrics will be displayed on the screen of the iPod Touch. This feature makes the iPod Touch an educational tool that allows the teacher to add the content related to a given course or meet the student's needs and learning style by offering the opportunity to listen to a song and read the lyrics in order to facilitate or check listening understanding. Currently the same technique is being considered in order to record poems for a literature course, with the prospect of uploading them on iTunes U.

Additionally, iTunes can connect to the iTunes Store via the Internet to purchase and download music, television shows, a variety of applications for the iPhone and iPod units as well as audiobooks and podcasts. Taking into consideration the fact that a variety of podcasts are available for free, it is important to explore how to use podcasts in English language teaching. „A podcasts is a non streamed webcast. It contains a series of digital media files (either audio or video) that are released episodically and often downloaded through web syndication." [5] Users can use the search field of iTunes to find and download a particular podcast, they can subscribe to any podcast by entering its RSS feed URL or browse the podcast

directory within iTunes Store. Once subscribed, the podcast can be set to download manually, or automatically — and as with other audio, content can be listened to directly or synced to an iPod.

It is necessary to mention that some podcasts contain a short description of each episode, while others contain the whole script. English as a Second Language Podcast issued by Center for Educational Development from Loss Angeles, California, [6] for example, contains dialogues that come along with the scripts and the teacher doesn't have to add them to the „lyrics" feature. Once an episode of this podcast is synced with an iPod touch, when the learners listen to a certain dialogue, they just tap on the iPod Touch screen in order to read the script. Additionally, every episode is divided into three parts: slow dialogue, explanations, and fast dialogue which makes the podcast a learning resource for learners of different levels. Elementary level students can start with the slow dialogue and the script if necessary, then improve their vocabulary by listening to the vocabulary explanations, and after this improve their listening skills by listening to the fast dialogue. Intermediate or upper-intermediate students may find it more useful to listen to the fast dialogue immediately or the explanations and the fast dialogue. Users can also become members of this podcast via its website and have access to complete transcripts, additional vocabulary, extra explanations and cultural notes, and comprehension questions. In this way, the teacher does not have to elaborate other resources to supplement a conversation class, they are already available for free through a diversity of podcasts and related support packs. The teacher has to select them and integrate them into a language course according to the course objectives and student's needs.

Teachers and learners interested in podcasts produced in British English could start with the site of the British Council and explore LearnEnglish Podcasts [7] to practice their English language listening skills. A great variety of resources for elementary to advanced level learners, for kids, teenagers and adults are available for free. LearnEnglish Elementary Podcast [8] is available with a support pack that can be downloaded from the website, and the learners are encouraged to give feedback about each episode and express their opinion about the discussed topic. Thus it improves students' listening skills, as well as speaking skills by promoting classroom discussion. LearnEnglish Themes Podcasts [9] are for learners at Intermediate to Advanced level and cover a large number of themes. LearnEnglish Stories and Poems Podcasts are also for learners at Intermediate to Advanced level and cover stories and poems by writers as famous as Shakespeare, Wordsworth, Tagore or Yeats, as well as stories by the resident writer, Chris Rose, and both stories and poems sent by the users. [10]

The podcasts also give the learners the opportunity to listen to authentic speakers and focus on American or/and British English depending on the course objectives and the learners' needs and curiosity, raising awareness about the difference between British and American English, improving the students' level of language proficiency and increasing learners' confidence.

Preparing for an English language class where podcast –based listening activities are integrated, the teacher has to listen to the podcasts, classify them on different levels or for different groups of learners, depending on the students' needs and the topics to be covered during a language course. It is also necessary to develop speaking activities, consolidation exercises and listening comprehension tests for the learners in order to measure the learning outcomes. Listening to a dialogue, for example, the students might be asked to write the script, role play this dialogue, think of another context where this dialogue could occur and role play it making the necessary substitutions or produce another one on the basis of the given topical vocabulary.

Finally, iTunes contains the iTunes U feature as part of the iTunes Store. iTunes U offers access to podcasts created by universities from all around the world. These podcasts contain a variety of course lectures, topical discussions with guest speakers, interviews, language courses, literature courses, etc. iTunes U gives the opportunity to choose some categories like Humanities, Language, Literature, Teaching and Education, check the top downloads, new and notable podcasts, and other featured content. Here are some examples of podcasts or episodes of a podcast that have been retrieved by choosing the Language category:

- „new and notable" window – „Searching for Shakespeare: the Documents at the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust";
- „featured" window - ENGL.1113: English Composition, produced by the Northeast Mississippi Community College;
- „top downloads" window - Franz Kafka, provided by the University of Warwick.

Following these links, the user can find out more information about these resources. „Searching for Shakespeare: The Documents at the Shakespeare Trust", for example, is just an episode of the podcast „Warwick/Shakespeare Birthplace Trust Collection" [11], which is actually a collection of films made by the university of Warwick in conjunction with the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust about the life and times

of William Shakespeare. Similarly, Franz Kafka is an episode of the podcast „Literature in the Modern World" [12], held by Professor Jeremy Treglowen at the Warwick University. The „featured" window contains links to podcasts and its episodes are displayed in a separate window. Following the link to „ENGL.1113: English Composition", produced by the Northeast Mississippi Community College, [13] the user finds out detailed information about the podcast, about the number of tracks that it contains, the name and length of each episode, if they are audio or video, if they are available for free or the user has to pay in order to download them, and when it was last modified.

Alternatively, the users can start by the category of provider, choose „universities and colleges", follow the link to the university they are interested in and explore the available courses and lectures. The user clicks on the course page and all the related files will be displayed. They may also contain audio and video recordings of class sessions. If users want to download a session of the course, they click on the „get" button if it is an audio file and the „get movie" button if it is a video file. The users can also download all the tracks from a given podcast and the whole course can be synced on the iPod. Therefore, iTunes and iPod units give the teachers the possibility to provide more content to the students after classes especially when there is a limited number of hours for a particular course.

Besides this, teachers can encourage students' individual learning and research via iTunes U. The learners develop new competencies, like working independently, managing his time and performing new tasks. They also develop such skills as accessing and managing resources by searching podcasts and specific information, organizing files, creating playlists, downloading and collecting audio and video resources, syncing content on an iPod device. This also contributes to helping the students build autonomous life-long learning skills. Moreover, it offers the possibility to initiate continuous professional development activities for the teachers themselves.

Technologies are changing the ways of teaching and learning a foreign language. Using iPods (and iPhone units) in English language classes, the teachers have the possibility to make listening activities accessible and to update different courses. Offering free access to listening resources for a variety of conversation courses has a valuable impact on improving the learners' listening and speaking skills. Besides this, this technique stresses the importance of raising students' awareness about mobile learning competences and encouraging them to make use of their iPhone devices for educational and professional purposes. Moreover, iTunes U enables access to podcasts about how to improve writing and reading skills for the students and teaching skills for the concerned practitioners.

With iTunes Apps, teachers are able to provide more content to the students after classes. They can also assign a small research project for a homework task in a course, and encourage individual learning and research. They can enrich the student's classroom experience and research opportunities by offering them authentic and updated resources, like course lectures from leading universities from all around the world that are available via iTunes U.

The iTunes Store can provide valuable content for different compulsory courses, optional courses, and, definitely, for professional development purposes, starting with improving the listening and speaking skills for the beginning teachers and staying up to date on research development in their subject areas for experienced teachers, which is an important measure in improving quality of learning in their educational institutions. iTunes and especially iTunes U provide teachers with a new source of knowledge and information and teachers should be aware of it. They have to meet technological challenges because it is a teacher's professional responsibility to keep their knowledge about methods and techniques in language teaching up to date.

Preparing for a course which requires mobile learning, teachers and students need to develop new information technology competencies. The set of knowledge and skills presented in this study has to be revised and/or developed if a given university provides a Wi-Fi platform for its students. Additionally, teachers need to pay attention to the learners' attitude in using this technique. Practitioners have to think critically on the use of mobile learning and the impact it can have on the behavior of the learners.

Familiarizing the students with the podcast technique, training them to subscribe to podcasts on line or how to use an aggregator, like iTunes, to manage subscriptions to podcasts and reconsidering the teacher's Information Technology competencies, this article promotes the quality of language teaching. Collaboration and relevant support from universities, continuous professional development programmes, state agencies and organizations supporting grants in the field of education and Information Technology development is required for the further development of this technique.

Teachers should continue using iPods in different university courses, establish contacts and networks with teams pursuing similar research and compare parallel developments. This will ensure a wider feedback and will definitely have a positive impact on English language teaching and iPod design.

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