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PODQUESTS **Language learning on the move**

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Many teachers have used or at least heard about webquests. These online activities are great for bringing authentic materials into the classroom and for encouraging students to draw on a range of language skills at the same time. Here I will describe an alternative to online webquests, in an attempt to encourage out-of-class learning in the 'real' world.

What are podquests?

Podquests are out-of-class language learning activities that encourage interaction with people and objects in authentic contexts. Podquests use Ipods for instructions, language input, and to give feedback to the learner. Imagine the following scenario: as a teacher you want to encourage your students to use the language outside the classroom and to use a range of different skills. One option would be to send students on a 'tour' around the city to get information about various sites. They could then report back in class. But how will students know they are on the right track? And would it not be more interesting if they could access relevant information about the sites as they were visiting them? And how about if they could answer questions at the same time, and if their answers would change what would happen next? This is exactly what podquests are designed to do.

Podquestst in practice

Let's look at an example. In this case a teacher in a language centre in a University in New Zealand wants to encourage recently arrived international students to get to know the city and to practise their language skills in real-life settings. She asks students to download the necessary materials from the course website. Students are assigned to small groups and can complete the podquest at any time during the week. Only one Ipod is needed per group. Students read the instructions on the Ipod which tell them to find a specific building that was mentioned in a local news item on the radio. The instructions also include a link to the actual news recording. Students are allowed to ask passers-by or find out the answer in any other way. When they find the right building they need to pick up an information leaflet that explains the history of the building. They then answer a number of multiple choice questions on the Ipod. If their answer is correct they get instructions to move to the next location. If their answer is wrong they may either be told to try again or get instructions to move to another location, not knowing that this is the wrong location. From later instructions they will need to realise that they may need to backtrack. Their next assignment may ask them to find a book that requires them to talk to a library assistant, use a catalogue and follow written instructions. Or it may ask them to find out the price of a product, read a timetable or make a phone call. The teacher in this example decided to make the podquest into a competition: the team to complete the quest first was declared the winner. This required them to follow all the instructions, find the required information and provide the right answers as quickly as possible.

How can I make a podquest?

So, how difficult is it to make a podquest? Actually it's surprisingly easy and once you have set up a basic structure, creating new podquests is quick. I have described the process of making multiple-choice exercises based on ESL podcasts for the Ipod elsewhere (Reinders 2006) and creating podquests is similar. In essence it involves creating a series of text files for the instructions and linking them together through hyperlinks (for example to make the correct answer to a multiple choice question to link to a file that says 'correct'). The necessary steps are:

- 1) Write your instructions and all the background information and store them in separate text files (you can use Notepad which is a free application that comes with Windows. Save your files as .txt).
- 2) Create or copy any audio materials (for example spoken instructions, music, news readings, etc), saved preferably as mp3 files to keep the size small. Also collect any photo or video materials.
- 3) Write down the structure of your instructions, the 'storyboard'. I find it easiest to use a three column page with the left-hand column describing what happens, the middle column showing what goes onto the Ipod, and the right-hand column showing what is expected from the students.
- 4) Create the hyperlinks in the text files that link to the other text files and multimedia materials. This is very easy to do. Excellent instructions are available here: <http://developer.apple.com/hardware/drivers/ipod/iPodNoteReaderGuide.pdf>
- 5) Transfer all the files to the Ipod and that's it!

Linking back to the class

Podquests are a great way to get students to use the language a range of authentic settings where they will need to read instructions, talk to native speakers, understand recordings and more. The experiences they gather during the podquest can be a good starting point for a discussion in class. What did you learn? What was the most difficult aspect of the podquest? What went wrong? A neat option is to use a clip-on microphone for the Ipod which students can use to make recordings during their podquests for playback in class.

Concluding comments

Podquests only work with the more expensive video Ipods which include the 'notes' function that lets you display text files with hyperlinks. This is of course a major drawback. Some universities (e.g. Duke) have experimented with providing Ipods to students to make course materials available, let students record lectures and more. Most schools do not have this type of funding available. Having said that, in the example given above one Ipod can be shared in a group thus reducing the number of units that need to be available. Other MP3 players are likely to soon offer similar functionality and with so many students owning one, it will probably soon be easier to organise a podquest.