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Kara McBride: Podcasts and Second Language Learning: Promoting Listening Comprehension and Intercultural Competence[1]

McBride's article "Podcasts and Second Language Learning: Promoting Listening Comprehension and Intercultural Competence" from 2009 is not a theoretical study, but rather explores the practical possibilities podcasts offer for promoting listening comprehension (LC) as well as intercultural competence in second language teaching. Specifically, she refers to podcasts that have not originally been produced for second language learners and, thus, provide authentic material. By podcasts McBride means "most downloadable sound files on the Internet" (154), including such files that are not syndicated or not part of a series of episodes.

After giving her definition of podcasts and a brief overview on their history, McBride argues for the suitability and usefulness of podcasts in second language teaching. Since podcasts are permanently available on the Internet, usually free of charge and up-to-date, they offer the opportunity to expand language learning beyond the classroom, as the listener can be mobile and the technology "can travel with the learner" (156). One of McBride's central arguments for the use of podcasts is that students will more likely listen to more authentic material on their own if they have been introduced to it in class before and have overcome an inhibition threshold that might detain learners from more frequent use of authentic audio material in the target language. The use of podcasts can not only expose students to authentic material, but also help them to become autonomous learners—especially since the variety of podcasts allows teachers and students to pick material of personal interest and increase motivation for

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[1] Kara McBride: Podcasts and Second Language Learning: Promoting Listening Comprehension and Intercultural Competence, in: Electronic Discourse in Language Learning and Language Teaching (Language Learning & Language Teaching 25), ed. by Lee B. Abraham and Lawrence Williams, Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Pub. Co., 2009, pp. 153-67.

learning. Along with the linguistic input podcasts provide, they also offer insights in the culture of the target language and can, hence, help to build intercultural competence. Especially students belonging to the "Net Generation" (156)—having grown up and being used to this technology—would, regarding McBride, respond very well to the use of new technology in second language learning.

McBride then presents basics of how LC works to discuss how podcasts in second language teaching can be used in "pedagogically sound ways" (156) to promote LC and intercultural competence. She describes LC as a combination of top-down and bottom-up skills.[2] To promote these two skills, second language teaching should, on the one hand, provide focused listening exercises that lead the students' attention and provide help in coping with the material. On the other hand, students need to have extensive exposure to authentic audio material in the target language.

The second half of the article shows how podcasts can be used to target both top-down and bottom-up skills to increase listening comprehension. McBride gives the teacher some guidelines to consider when using podcasts in lessons. She stresses the importance of providing background or context information to increase top-down skills that can compensate for lower bottom-up skills—especially on lower levels of proficiency in the target language. Also, she emphasizes the importance of the guidance students need to achieve reasonable goals in LC, without understanding the whole audio sequence. For instance, read-along activities, cloze exercises or identifying key words in a text can help to promote bottom-up skills. Due to the availability and mobility of podcast technology, LC can more easily be performed outside the classroom setting than other audio materials, since students can listen

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[2] "Bottom-up skills involve listening to sounds, perceiving words and sentences among them, and parsing them. Top-down skills are those that use general world knowledge and background information to activate appropriate schemata through which to interpret spoken messages." (157)

to the audio files again or to other sequences. Helping students find podcasts in their own interest areas can also facilitate students' autonomy and—by bringing student-found podcasts into the classroom—"provide an important opportunity for meaningful interaction" (165).

McBride's article does not provide results of an original study, but rather draws from other studies to discuss potential applications in a real class setting. While many of her explanations seem somewhat dated and banal (for instance how to find and download podcasts), and her remarks on how to implement podcasts in teaching are very general, many of her observations can in my opinion be fruitful food for thoughts on how to promote LC in (and beyond) the classroom. In contrast to many video/audio materials accompanying textbooks, the availability of podcasts gives the teacher more opportunity to create a broader variety of tasks for students in and outside the classroom. While McBride neglects to make clear the specificity of podcasts as opposed to authentic video material on platforms like YouTube, I think that the pure audio file might allow students to focus more on the spoken word and to also obtain authentic up-to-date cultural knowledge textbook materials often do not provide. Utilizing podcasts as an additional medium in class to provide authentic input—both linguistically and culturally—is a benefit McBride's article makes clear.