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## Producing Podcasts in a Chinese Classroom: A Digital Humanities Project

### Cover Page Footnote

I acknowledge the Seton Hall University and Ramapo College DH initiative, which enabled me to pursue this project. I thank Drs. Mary Balkun and Marta Deyrup for leading the initiative and supporting my work. I also thank Dr. Anthony Nicotera for sparking my interest in podcast and answering my questions. I am grateful to Brittney Segura, a work-study student at WSOU 89.5 FM, Seton Hall University for editing my students' podcasts. All the students participating in the project deserve my special thanks.

# Producing Podcasts in a Chinese Classroom: A Digital Humanities Project

Dongdong Chen  
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## Abstract

This action research which situates itself in the context of Digital Humanities focuses on engaging students of Introductory Chinese course with an assignment to create podcasts in the form of an interview. Requiring students to integrate the aural, oral, and textual information via technology so as to carry a conversation with an interlocutor challenges them to convey their thoughts from the language they think in into meaningful ideas using the target language. In this way, students are “pushed” to convert their listening, speaking, and writing from being isolated components into a more dynamic and cohesive mode of communicating. As they explore expressing their ideas in the language they are learning, they develop the skills and sensibility needed to critically analyze their own work. Although limited in scale, the podcast format urges students to transform what they need to learn into a familiar product.

*Keywords:* digital humanities, producing podcast, teaching and learning Chinese as a second language, podcasting skills

## Introduction

Computer-assisted language learning (henceforth, CALL) is well established but still developing. While there have been debates about its value, most teachers hold favorable views about its contribution to language learning (e.g., Xu, 2015; Zainab, 2019). With respect to technology in teaching Chinese as a second language, research has shown its effective impact on different aspects of student learning (e.g., Jiang and Ramsay, 2005; Bai et al., 2019; Zhang, 2019; Xie et al., 2021). Meanwhile, the ubiquitous availability of personal computers, laptops, and mobile devices has resulted in a new way of research and teaching: Digital Humanities (henceforth, DH). What is DH? What role can it play in language teaching? How does DH differ from CALL? In presenting innovative ways of teaching nineteenth-century American literature, Travis and DeSpain (2018) argue that the key element of DH is to have students utilize digital tools to create products or make things, results of which are shared in a community. In terms of language instruction, Oskoz (2020) holds a similar view.

This paper reports on a study that is set in the context of DH regarding the teaching and learning of Chinese. Specifically, the study describes action research that focuses on engaging students of Introductory Chinese course with an assignment to create podcasts in the form of an interview. The author attempts to show that requiring students to integrate the aural, oral, and textual information via technology so as to carry a conversation with an interlocutor challenges them to convey their thoughts from the language they think in into meaningful ideas using the target language. In this way, students are “pushed” to convert their listening, speaking, and writing from being isolated components into a more dynamic and cohesive mode of communicating. As they explore expressing their ideas in the language they are learning, they

develop the skills and sensibility needed to critically analyze their own work. Podcasting urges students to transform what they need to learn into a familiar product.

## Digital Humanities

Defining DH has not been easy since its inception. The emergence of this novel approach necessitated simultaneously understanding what it is and what it is not. In 2009, the Day of Digital Humanities project asked the question, “What is Digital Humanities?” By 2014, the online platform <https://whatisdigitalhumanities.com/> prompted over 800 answers (see the chapter “Selected definitions from the Day of Digital Humanities: 2009-2012” of the book *Defining Digital Humanities: A Reader* by Terras et al. (2013, pp. 279-287).<sup>1</sup> The differences of how participants answer the question vary depending on the individual’s educational goal, need, audience, etc. and the resultant parameters of the DH “field” and/or on which side of the field s/he stands (e.g., Carter, 2013; Terras et al., 2013). Burdick et al. (2012) claim the following, “Digital Humanities refers to new modes of scholarship and institutional units for collaborative, transdisciplinary, and computationally engaged research, teaching, and publication. . . . Digital Humanities is defined by the opportunities and challenges that arise from the conjunction of the term digital with the term humanities to form a new collective singular” (p. 122). This definition is unique in that it takes into consideration both “opportunities” and “challenges” as a result of combining “digital” with “humanities.”

By “opportunities,” Burdick et al. acknowledged new prospects whereby more traditional classroom learning is animated with digital tools and innovative methods like “hands-on project-based learning.” When specialists collaborate across disciplines, “new inquiry and knowledge production” cultivate a technologically enhanced generation of “humanists.” Research undertaken in such a digital context can widen the scope and enhance the quality and visibility of the investigation. While traditional concerns associated with “the Humanities” remain as essential in DH, the “challenges” are how to address these fundamental questions through digital instruments. For example, USC Shoah Foundation’s Visual History Archive provides online access to videos wherein cultural data had been extracted from the 2-hour-long taped testimonies of over 52,000 Holocaust and other genocide survivors. With the help of computer analyses, machine reading, advanced filming techniques, and specialized display technologies, users can quickly access any one video out of the thousands for watching. Additionally, in a few cases, users are able to not only interpose their own reactions to what they are viewing but also to converse with the survivor whose interview was pre-recorded. Such a fascinating interactive “conversation” between users and a survivor is made possible by distant reading implemented by “new and impactful technology.”<sup>2</sup> This shows that by conducting research with digital tools, DH enables expansive studies of humanities and yield scholarly insights previously unattainable without difficult and/or costly methodology.

In the collection *Teaching with Digital Humanities: Tools and Methods for Nineteenth-Century American Literature*, editors Travis and DeSpain (2018) presented many innovative ways instructors of nineteenth-century American literature involved their students in improving skills and interests while advancing the study of the academic content. For example, the study by

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<sup>1</sup> The site was made by Jason Heppler, a historian of modern America and Digital Engagement Librarian, University of Nebraska at Omaha.

<sup>2</sup> To engage in virtual conversation with holocaust survivor Pinchas Gutter, visit <https://iwitnessbeta.usc.edu/dit/pinchas>

Cynthia L. Hallen required her students to participate in developing the database *Emily Dickinson Lexicon* with the help of *WordCruncher*, a free app. Years of collaboration between the instructor and the students of different classes eventually resulted in a website that hosts the digital dictionary of every word that appears in Dickinson's poems.<sup>3</sup> In addition, Hallen provided her seminar students with a digital copy of the complete poems of Eliza R. Snow and asked them to compare and contrast the poets' word choices. In this way, students were able to better appreciate the poems of the two authors. In the 15 case studies comprising Travis and DeSpain's collection, instructors engaged students in active learning through technology-supported assignments or projects in the format of either making, or archiving, or acting and playing, curating, etc. Consequently, students built archives or worked as authors, editors, lexicographers, project managers, and/or collaborators while learning the subject matter. In the process of doing the above, students developed a critical analysis of literature in novel ways and comprehended multiple uses of literary studies. Through demonstrating the value of the DH pedagogy utilized in teaching American literature of the nineteenth century, Travis and DeSpain invited literary scholars as well as those from other disciplines to discuss how DH pedagogy can "deepen their own objectives for student learning and scholarship" (p. ix).

Oskoz (2020) observed that language learning – too often regarded as primarily a matter of acquiring vocabulary and grammar – "increasingly transformed communicative practices both outside and within the language classroom" . . . into "a multimodal endeavor." Instructors involve students with technology-enabled projects to facilitate their learning, such as (1) the collaborative writing via *wikis* by learners of German; (2) the telecollaboration among learners of Spanish in the US and learners of English in Spain through *Google+* and *Skype*; (3) the use of an educational, social platform like *NING* for English learners to achieve grammatical competence, meaningful participation, and digital competency.<sup>4</sup> These case studies showed creatively incorporating technologies not only allowed learners to experience the authenticity of languages and cultures but also fostered their development of information, digital, and media literacies, which are crucial in the modern world of learning. Thus, Oskoz claimed that new tools empower teaching methods, enrich receptive and productive capacity, encourage multiple modes to convey meanings, and enhance learner agency, thereby creating a better learning experience.

Balkun and Deyrup (2020, XV) argued that a major theme of DH is its potential to transform the way faculty teach and the way they conduct research. Previously, only limited research was done in the field of DH with respect to the teaching and learning of Chinese as a foreign language. Educators, including language professionals, are charged with cultivating learners' 21<sup>st</sup> century skills, including not only the knowledge of the subject matter but also the abilities of critical thinking, creative analysis, collaboration, communication, and digital literacy (Partnership for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills, 2009). By having students engage in the process of making and sharing podcasts, the instructor encourages and enables students to develop, while learning the target language, lifetime learning skills, which "help students thrive in today's digitally and globally interconnected world" (Howlett & Waemusa, 2019, p. 74).

## Podcast and Podcasting: Literature Review

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<sup>3</sup> For more information, visit <https://edl.byu.edu/>

<sup>4</sup> *Wikis* is a tool that allows learners to write and edit collaboratively in a document. *Google+* was a social network, but not used any more. *Ning* is an online educational social network website (<https://www.ning.com/>).

According to Drew (2017), podcasts emerged after the boom of Web 2.0 technologies during the early 2000s. In Merriam Webster Dictionary, *podcast* is defined as “a program (as of music or talk) made available in digital format for automatic download over the Internet.” Phillips (2017) refers to *podcast* as “a digital audio (or video) file that is created and then uploaded to an online platform to share with others” (P. 159). The above two definitions suggest that a digital recording cannot be long in order to achieve “automatic download” and “sharing” purposes. While podcasts are usually short, they must be stimulating in content, as well as audibly interesting with content-appropriate music and/or sound effects – and even be entertaining when done well. It is not surprising that outlets like VOA (Voice of America), BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation), and NPR (National Public Radio) have been popular for decades. As podcasts contain materials, rich in genres and topics, convenient to listen to and replay, they present potential as an ideal pedagogical tool for instructional purposes.

Language educators are among the pioneers to embrace the use of podcasts in a classroom (e.g., McCarty, 2005; O’Bryan and Hegelheimer, 2007; Salmon and Nie, 2008; Ducate and Lomicka, 2009; Kim and King, 2011).<sup>5</sup> Lomicka and Lord (2011) observed three goals to utilize podcasts in or out of the language classroom: developing learners’ listening abilities, building their speaking skills, and improving pronunciation. Hasan and Tan (2013) gathered 60 journal articles that addressed the advantage of integrating podcasts in ESL teaching and learning. They narrowed these down to 20 based on whether or not the research was “original and empirical” related to language learning and teaching. Reviewing these for the effects of podcasts on students’ achievement and, relatedly, their learning attitude, Hasan and Tan found that having students access podcasts not only improved learners’ functional skills in listening and speaking but also concomitantly developed their positive perceptions about podcasting pedagogy.

Subsequent research by other scholars continues to focus on either the impact of podcasts on student learning outcomes, or the change on student perspectives, or a combination of both (e.g., Tan et al. 2012; Basaran and Cabaroğlu, 2014; Thomas and Toland, 2015; Soerjowardhana and Nugroho, 2017). Empirical investigations have also been conducted to determine if there is quantitative evidence regarding the effects of podcast with respect to the acquisition of various languages (e.g., Hirzinger-Unterrainer, 2012; Kelly and Klein, 2016; Abdulrahman et al., 2018). Two studies are relevant to the present research. Tan et al. (2012) examined the perception of learners of Chinese towards podcast content and design. The study involved Malaysian university students of elementary Chinese who were required to listen to 5-to-10-minute podcasts posted on a website for 12 weeks. The results of the survey showed that students regarded the use of podcasts as a good learning tool. The results also suggested that while some students found the podcasts helpful, a few felt burdened with extra learning. Kelly and Klein (2016) investigated whether listening to supplementary Chinese podcasts would improve students’ listening and speaking skills of the target language and learning confidence. The research involved two groups of university beginners of Chinese: one serving as the experimental group and one the control group, both taught by the same instructor using the same materials and instructional activities. However, the experimental group listened to Chinese podcasts on the usage of Chinese grammar each week, whereas the control group listened to English podcasts on Chinese culture weekly. The results showed that listening to supplementary Chinese grammar podcasts significantly improved learners’ speaking skills and confidence, but not listening skills; visual learners did not benefit from audio podcasts when learning the language.

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<sup>5</sup> See Fernandez et al. (2015) for a comprehensive review of the use of podcasts in Higher Education.

While the above two studies presented encouraging results about the effect of podcasts in teaching Chinese, they did not require students to create podcasts, which is the focus of the present research. With podcasts becoming a popular tool for language education, podcasting, a term used here to refer to the creation of podcasts by students to fulfill course requirements, has also grown into a novel instrument among innovative educators (e.g., Abelmann, 2014; Green et al., 2014; Phillips 2017; Smith et al. 2019). In Phillips (2017), two different student cohorts of the *English for Health Professionals* course were required to create two digital recordings over a period of two years. After the completion of the podcasts, the learners were questioned about their perceptions of the podcasting assignments through an online survey followed by a face-to-face interview. It was found that the majority of students enjoyed developing podcasts and responded with positive comments about the activities. The successful experience made the students, including those who were shy, feel more confident about speaking English and using technologies. Phillips concluded that the podcasting assignments supported teaching and learning, as it (1) increases learner confidence, (2) supports collaborative learning, (3) improves language production skills, and (4) enforces transferable skills.

Lomicka and Lord (2011) claimed, “Podcasting has several theoretical underpinnings in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research, especially in the areas of input, output, and motivation” (p. 16). Input refers to learners’ exposure to the language, while output to their production of the language, both directly resulting in the acquisition of a second language, as contended by Krashen (1982) in his comprehensive language input theory and Swain (1985) in her output model. In creating a podcast, students read and listen to the language and speak and write in the language. The more input that students can absorb, the more output they would generate. As students progress in receiving and producing the target language, their motivation in learning arises accordingly. Thus, learners’ active engagement with the language enables them to further enjoy learning. That is why Jane R. Willis, the well-known scholar of SLA regarded input, output, and motivation as three essential conditions for language learning (Willis, 1996).

Although podcasting has been reported as effective for practically and conceptually learning a language, the number of studies that examine the use of podcasting in teaching Chinese is scant. Intrigued by the value of “making,” “sharing,” and the “transformative potential,” the author of this paper decided to engage her first-year students of Chinese to develop a podcast. The rationale of the action research is twofold: (1) to examine the effect of podcasting on student learning in the target language and (2) to explore the role of DH pedagogy in language teaching. By focusing the podcast project on the three research questions, as shown below, the author hopes to shed light on how DH can contribute to the development of students’ linguistic competency as well as other skills.

- How is a podcast project implemented in a Chinese classroom?
- What are the benefits of podcasting for the teaching of Chinese?
- What did the instructor learn from doing this project?

## Podcasting Project

### Methodology

As a qualitative study in the nature of action research, this project was conducted in the second part of Introductory Chinese at an American University. The researcher/author and the instructor of the course designed and implemented the project. During the planning phase, the

author designed and prepared the project by deciding the format of the podcast, determining the topics for the interview, making timelines, sorting out logistic needs, and assessing the project at each stage of development. The implementation phase was joined by the students, who were the major performers of the project, and the media specialist, who provided technical support. By describing the two phases, this section will address the first research question, *How is the podcasting project implemented in a Chinese classroom?*

### ***Planning Phase***

Over the past few years, the instructor of the course assigned students to interview a classmate about his/her experience of learning Chinese as part of assessments. Students were required to submit a videotape of the interview. This assignment fulfilled one of the course requirements. After students handed in their interviews, the video became a record for the instructor. As such, students did not have a chance to view each other's work. Further issue noted is that the assignment did not require much higher-order thinking, in-depth analysis, extended preparation, repeated practice, or complicated digital techniques.

Inspired by the success of a podcasting project completed by a colleague in Social Work who had shared at a DH workshop held at the institution, the instructor wanted to expand this interview assignment into a term-long podcasting project. Three aspects were examined before the decision was made. Firstly, what was the objective of the project? Secondly, what would be the topics for the interview? Thirdly, what logistic support was needed? Determining the objective of the project was the first priority. According to the principles of Backward Design (Wiggins and McTighe, 2005), "desired results" – what the instructor hopes the students to achieve from the project – should be identified before planning the other details of implementation. The essential curricular goals of this project were to enhance the students with more meaningful interactions, through which students would build communication skills in the target language and podcasting literacy. The final work would be placed on a discussion board of the University course management system, where students could visit and make comments.

With the objective established, the next task was to decide appropriate topics for the podcast. This, in turn, required a thorough analysis of the learners. Participating in this project were 23 students in two separate sessions of Introductory Chinese II, including ten females and 13 males, with an age range of 19-22.<sup>6</sup> Fourteen students were freshmen, seven sophomores, and two juniors, working on a variety of majors. All the students successfully completed their first part of Introductory Chinese in the preceding semester except one student who self-studied on her own and passed an interview with the instructor. Consequently, these students were able to respond to simple direct questions or requests for information related to greetings, introducing themselves and family members, describing their hobbies, and telling time. Based on the results of a mock HSK Test Level 1 (i.e., a proficiency test of Chinese as a foreign language), of the 21 students who participated in the test, all except one passed.<sup>7</sup> In terms of speaking, their oral proficiency was generally rated as Novice Mid with some which would fall in between Novice Mid to Novice High in accordance with the proficiency guidelines by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL, 1987), because their conversation consisted of mostly formulaic expressions and memorized structures. As most students were only able to carry guided conversations due to a limited vocabulary and restricted grammar, it was crucial to

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<sup>6</sup> One student who was sick did not produce the podcast. As such the student was not included in the report.

<sup>7</sup> One student was absent from the class when the test was administered, and the other was not able to finish due to a technology issue. These two students should be able to pass the test if they could have done it in a normal setting.



provide an appropriate topic that was neither too challenging nor too dull so that it held students' interests and fell within their capacity. With these criteria, Language Learning Experience and School Life were designated. These topics were both relatable to students' lives and moderate in complexity regarding words and structures. Moreover, the topics provided two separate themes enabling students to choose based on their own preferences.

In order to engage students to create an interesting podcast, the instructor should also be clear about the following questions: What technology could be used to do a quality recording? What free apps were available that could be used to turn the recording into a podcast and publish it? What was the platform to host the podcasts? Who would be the support personnel that students could go to when help was needed in the process of the project? Fortunately, a discussion with the faculty who had succeeded in completing his student-generated podcast project in his Social Work class shed some light and helped the instructor to proceed with the project.

### ***Implementation Phase***

The implementation phase kicked off when it was assigned to students on the first-day class of a spring semester. The podcast project outlined in the syllabus was posted on Blackboard, a course management system used in the institution. The requirements included the following: (1) the podcast must be in the target language; (2) it should be around three minutes long; (3) it should contain three components: an interview of a self-selected partner on one of the two assigned topics, an introduction highlighting the purpose of the conversation, and a conclusion summarizing the interview. The project constituted 10% of the course grade.<sup>8</sup>

The textbook adopted for the course contained relevant vocabulary and grammar for the two topics, which students learned at a planned pace in accordance with the syllabus. These linguistic elements could serve as building blocks for students to develop their scripts for either of the two topics. However, it required much scaffolding for students to piece together the learned words and structures so as to formulate their questions and answers for an interview. Another concern was providing the technology for students to conduct an interview and then publish it. Therefore, two major aspects of support were supplied to assist students in undertaking the project: one concerning the content and the other the technology.

Regarding the content, after the students had a grasp of vocabulary, the instructor organized the students to brainstorm on what questions would be appropriate to raise for a conversation on the topic of Language Learning Experience. To that end, a group activity was organized in class. Each of the students was provided with a list of 20 questions in English related to the learning of Chinese, such as *How long have you been learning Chinese? Do you often practice speaking Chinese? How often do you write Chinese characters? With whom do you usually practice speaking Chinese?* Randomly placed in a group of three or four, and assigned five questions, students in each group were given 10 minutes to discuss how to express themselves in the target language by translating the questions from English into Chinese and how to answer the questions. After that was done, each group took turns to share their work with the class. This activity guided students to think about how to develop their own interview questions and answers if they decided to select the topic of Language Learning Experience. For the topic of School Life, a list of 12 questions was posted on Blackboard for students to work on individually. These preparations were made to ensure that students would be able to start in the right way as they began to write their scripts. In addition to the activity, students were later

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<sup>8</sup> It was initially set as 5%, which got extra 5% after the Speech Contest event was cancelled due to COVID-19.

provided with instructions as to how to start and end an interview. For the Introduction, students were advised to include a prologue introducing who s/he was, whom s/he was to interview, and what they were going to talk about. For the Conclusion, students were required to summarize in a couple of sentences what they learned from the conversation partner. Two Chinese samples of the Introduction and Conclusion were provided for both topics, serving as a model for students.

Two steps were taken with respect to technology. First, the instructor consulted an instructional designer from the Teaching, Learning, and Technology Center of the University, seeking resources for podcast creation. Second, the instructor reached out to the University student-run radio station in hopes for students to access their expertise and/or equipment. The manager of the Station sent a media specialist who had experience in producing podcasts to assist the instructor with this project. Due to the breakout of the COVID-19, the specialist provided instructions on how to record material and even generously offered her expertise to edit students' recordings when the latter was completed. This technical assistance not only tremendously helped students complete the project on time but also assured the quality of the final products in technology. However, this arrangement also created a drawback, as it deprived the students of the right to edit their own work, hence losing a valuable opportunity to further hone their podcasting skills.

## Results

### Project Completion

The sixteen weeks of the semester were divided into three stages for this project: Weeks 1-7 as Pre-project, Weeks 8-15 as During-project, and Week 16 as Post-project in accordance with Tavares and Potter (2018). What were the roles of each stakeholder involved in the project? Table 1 provides a view as to who did what during each stage.

Table 1  
*Roles of Participants in the Implementation Phase*

Week	WHAT INSTRUCTOR DID	WHAT STUDENTS DID	WHAT STAFF DID
1	Assigning project	Informed of the project	NA
2-7	Preparing students; Working with experts	Learning the Language; Thinking	Informed of the project
8	Implementing activity; Working with experts	Doing activity	Working with Instructor
9-10	Providing guidance (Content)	Determining the topic and partner	Working with Instructor
11	Providing guidance (Technology)	Developing the script	Providing guidance (Technology)
12	Providing feedback (content and technology)	Revising the script	Providing guidance (Technology)
13	Providing feedback (content and technology)	Recording	Supporting Students
13	Working with students & expert	Submitting recording	Editing
14-15	Working with students & expert	Submitting recording	Editing
16	Publishing & Reflecting	Listening & Reflecting	NA

Although the podcasting was the students' assignment, the role that instructor played was instrumental throughout the entire process. The instructor worked as an architect overseeing each part of the project in the Pre-project stage, as an organizer, cheerleader, coach, model, supporter in the During-project stage, and as an evaluator in the Post-project stage. As mentioned above, the designing and planning took place before the start of the semester because the instructor must evaluate in advance the pros and cons of doing the project from both teaching and learning perspectives. The instructor developed strategies to maximize learning accordingly if any issue would occur. Once the project was assigned, the instructor endeavored to ensure that each stage was executed on the right track. Starting from the Pre-project stage, the instructor scaffolded students for each step, ranging from making requirements, instructions, and resources available to students to assisting and encouraging students whenever they ran into problems. The instructor stood by, ready to offer guidance in the format of feedback and encouragement. Students were encouraged whenever they ran into difficulty.

Students were the sole actors during the first two stages. At the Pre-project stage, students prepared themselves linguistically, i.e., learning new materials and practicing what was being learned. In addition, they worked on the logistics by exploring (1) what topic to talk about, (2) what questions to ask, (3) whom to invite for an interview, (4) what technology to use. At the During-project stage, students (1) wrote and revised their script; (2) practiced reading aloud their script time and again until they felt ready for recording; (3) selected a tool to interview; (4) recorded the three pieces, i.e., an introduction, an interview, and a conclusion.

The media specialist joined in at the Pre-project stage when the instructor was exploring possible technologies. Acting as a consultant, the expert discussed with the instructor, provided resources and advice, and helped the instructor finalize a game plan for technology. At the During-project stage, when students were recording their work, the specialist supplied support by either assisting students directly or troubleshooting their issues if necessary. Finally, the technical expert edited the students' recordings.

The Post-project stage started when students' podcasts were showcased in the class, and all final products were published on Blackboard. At this stage, students listened to the podcasts, celebrated their own accomplishments, and reflected upon their work, while the instructor started to analyze what had worked and what had not, in addition to accessing the performance of each student. As can be seen, throughout the whole process of the project implementation, the students, assisted by the instructor and the expert from the radio station, were fully involved in the creation of their products. They endeavored to do all the work required either individually (i.e., deciding the topic, looking for a partner, writing up the script, and practicing) or collaboratively (i.e., determining a time for the interview rehearsal and a time for the interview recording). If the quality was not to their satisfaction, they would do it again. In the process, students dived into deep learning and built teamwork and self-management skills. It is certain that students must take over the complete ownership of the project from the time when they started it until they were done; otherwise, they would not be able to finish the work.

Table 2 provides a summary as to what topic students selected, how many of them reached out to a Chinese native speaker for a conversation, how many interviewed their peers, or friend, or family member, and how many acted as interviewers and interviewees as well.

As can be seen, the majority of students (i.e., 21 out of 23) selected Language Learning Experience as the topic, and only 2 chose School Life for the interview. The reason for this imbalance was probably that by the middle of March, students had left the school to study remotely due to the pandemic. As there were only remote classes to attend, with neither

extracurricular activities nor in-person interaction outside the class, there was little interesting campus life to talk about. Apart from that, it was also hard for students to describe in the target language their school life which was largely disrupted by the pandemic. On the topic of Language Learning Experience, of the 21 students, 18 focused on learning Chinese as a foreign language, and three on learning English as a foreign language. As far as the conversation partner was concerned, most of the students (i.e., 20) turned to their peers in the same class for the interview. This again might be related to the pandemic, which had posed challenges for students to reach out to others beyond their own classroom. However, five students were among the exception. Two talked with their family members (i.e., mother and sister respectively), two with their friends from other schools, and one with his friend from the same school. Out of these five students, four served as interviewers only. It is worth pointing out that one student interviewed her language partner, who was a Chinese-speaking university student in China, on the topic of experience of learning English. In the meantime, this student was interviewed by her classmate who was interested in knowing her experience with learning Chinese. Since most students worked with their classmates, each of the 18 students ended up acting as both interviewers and interviewees. This is good as well as bad. The good part of this arrangement was that students, working in pairs, were able to prepare and practice together. In so doing, the students doubled their meaningful interactions and gained a truly interactive experience as they learned from and helped each other, thereby increasing the opportunity to use the language. The shortcoming of this kind of pair work was that students would tend to ask similar questions and answer in the same manner. Knowing this possible issue, the instructor reminded students to be creative by adding their own characteristics to both questions and answers. Some students handled the challenges very well.

Table 2

*Outcomes of Podcasts regarding the Topic and the Interviewee*

Total No. of Students	Topic Selected	Topic Selected	Person Interviewed	Person Interviewed	Role Played	Role Played
Participating & Finishing Project	Language Learning	School Life	Classmate, Friend Family	Native Speaker	Interviewer & Interviewee	Interviewer only
23	21	2				
23			20	3		
23					18	5

## Benefits

*What are the benefits of podcasting for the teaching of Chinese?* Here are some observations from the instructor's point of view. Firstly, the podcasting assignment was an effective learner-centered work, which allowed students to provide their "voice and choice" (e.g., Morrison, 2008; Larmer et al., 2015) with the right to select a partner to talk about a topic that interested them. Although students were not able to meet each other in person starting from the middle of the semester, their interest in and enthusiasm about achieving an ultimate goal drove them to work hard. The fact that students were motivated to pursue and perform both individually and collaboratively promoted learner autonomy, the "ability to take charge of one's own learning" (Holec, 1981, p. 3). Secondly, students were aware that the podcast, once

produced, would be “published” for other peers to listen to or download. This might have encouraged students to make greater efforts, as the majority would want their final product to be regarded as good work. Many students felt proud of their achievements when their work was showcased in class, which greatly built up their confidence. Thirdly, the meaningful interaction and communication throughout the process enabled the students to get to know one another, which further developed their social, emotional, and collaborative skills, i.e., how to work with others in order to achieve their joint goal. Autonomous learning, high-level motivation and confidence, and the development of life-long skills to understand and to connect to the subject matter are part of 21<sup>st</sup> century skills (Nazikian and Park, 2016). The results show, not only was the curricular goal of this project met, namely, enhancing student interaction so as to build communication skills and developing podcasting literacy, additional benefits were also achieved, e.g., learner autonomy, motivation and confidence, and social skills, some of which are in alignment with what was reported by Phillips (2017).

Burdick et al. (2012) regarded Project-based Learning (PBL) as a “complement to classroom-based learning” by engaging students with real-world projects (e.g., Larmer et al., 2015; Boss and Larmer, 2018). The current project created a real-world scenario in which students of Chinese were able to converse meaningfully with other interlocutors. As students prepared for the assignment, they had to consider such questions as who would serve as an ideal partner for the interview, what to ask to facilitate an engaging conversation, and how to communicate in the target language. After students determined who would be their partner, they began writing their individual scripts. They also needed to rehearse until they both felt comfortable and ready for recording. To achieve an ideal effect in both content and technology, students recorded their work several times. The entire process, which lasted a bit over three months, served as an ideal formative assessment — the assessments for learning — through which students self-monitored their own learning and progress. These characteristics align with what Tavares and Potter (2018) have observed with respect to applying PBL to language learning. Du (2012) and Zhao and Beckett (2014) examined the application of PBL in the acquisition of Chinese, while Pitura and Berlińska-Kopeć (2018) and Tavares and Potter (2018) explored the PBL in the acquisition of English. Like the previous studies, the current work demonstrated that students improved linguistic skills, developed meaningful engagement with the language, and gained authentic learning experiences.

In view of digital pedagogy, the podcasting assignment manifests some interesting features which can be used to further illustrate the benefits discussed above. The assignment required the participants to be open-minded and collaborative so that students from different classes, schools, or communities could exchange ideas openly. After the project was completed, everyone’s final product was made available online for others to access or to comment upon within the course community. The project would not be completed without collaboration, which included the joint efforts of multiple parties, i.e., the instructor, interviewer, interviewee, and technology expert. The teamwork between the student and his/her partner involved collaboration both in content and logistics. Other than openness and collaboration, students with a preliminary proficiency in Chinese to carry over a smooth conversation in the target language needed to understand each other’s questions and answers, which required them to be ready and willing to explore, experiment, and embrace new ideas by playing with the language and the technology. While working together, students discovered that sometimes certain methods failed to work, and they had to try again and again. Constant trials created a new opportunity to apply their knowledge and skills to a real-world scenario. The process offered opportunities for students to

play and practice and also to connect the classroom learning with the real-world communities. Through working with the partner, composing the script, playing with the technology, and practicing the language, students took full control of their own learning, which empowered students to become responsible and active learners. Openness, collaboration, play, practice, student agency are some of the major concepts of digital pedagogy in the humanities, as identified by Davis et al. (2020).

What is students' learning experience? Some students shared thoughts in blog posts submitted to the DH project website of the university. Their perceptions provide another look at the educational benefits of podcasting. For example, one student who interviewed a Chinese native speaker about the latter's English learning experience and was, at the same time, interviewed by a classmate regarding her own learning of Chinese, said that the project was "*such an enjoyable learning experience.*" She "*discovered*" the secret of successful language learning through participating in the project — learning a foreign language, regardless of Chinese or English, required "*studying methods and motivation for learning.*" The conversation with a Chinese learner of English and an English learner of Chinese allowed the student to appreciate both the hardship and fun of learning a language first-hand. This reflection proved inspiring because the student came to understand what it meant to be an effective and efficient language learner. This will likely remain a valuable lesson for her life-long journey of learning Chinese.

For another student, the podcasting project appeared daunting at the beginning. The difficulty increased after the campus was closed due to the pandemic. However, as time passed, with the support from the media specialist, the student began to enjoy creating his podcast and was able to "*truly dive into the language.*" In his blog submission, the student pointed out that he and his partner created two presentations of which they were "*both sincerely proud.*" The student even mentioned that "*If I ever have to make another podcast in my future..., I now know that it is an assignment to look forward to.*" This testimony provides evidence of a transformative learning experience. Acting as both an interviewer and an interviewee on the same topic, the student had the opportunity to carry two parallel conversations, but from different points of view. This greatly helped him improve his Chinese conversational skills. It is particularly refreshing to note some exemplary aspects of his language in the two interviews. For example, he provided an engaging introduction to set a stage for his interview and an incisive conclusion following the interview; he spoke fluently with clear pronunciation and intonation; he appropriately used filler words like *ò, oh; èn, ok* to keep the conversation flowing naturally; he politely responded with remarks like *Hěn yǒu yìsì, Very interesting, Wǒ yě juéde shēngdiào hěn nán, I also found the tones very difficult* to give his listener feedback; he even followed the Chinese verbal behavior to repeat the word *Shì, Yes* and the phrase like *Hěn kù, It's cool* to express his agreement. Injecting filler words, giving the right feedback with encouraging expressions, and repeating certain words to make his responses more relevant and emphatic showed that the student was aware of applying communicative strategies in his Chinese conversation. These kinds of authentic skills would rarely be acquired in a regular classroom. The authenticity was further reinforced by the fact that students' final products were posted online, and students were more serious about "producing high-quality work" for the "public audience" (Boss and Larmer, 2018, p. 48).

*What did the instructor learn from doing this project?* For future podcasting projects, some implications are in order. Firstly, a rubric should be supplied to students in advance. By providing detailed descriptions of different aspects of the project, students would become well informed as to what exactly they are expected to do and what efforts they need to make to achieve the highest goal. This way, students strive for academic excellence. Such a rubric would also

guide the instructor in assessing students' work objectively. Secondly, students should be encouraged to exchange the script with their partner if the latter is their classmate. Requiring students to review each other's scripts and provide feedback would further strengthen meaningful interactions among students and reinforce their learning as well. Peers' feedback would serve as a helpful formative assessment to ensure that students work toward the learning goal. Thirdly, along that line, students should be required to hand in their scripts to the instructor for final checking. This requirement would remind students to pay careful attention to the linguistic and cultural elements. From a learning point of view, a meeting with the instructor to go over the script or co-edit the language would help students understand why certain words are not ideal and why some structures would be more appropriate. Such a process would assist students in learning and helping them retain learning. Fourthly, it would be more beneficial if students were required to edit their own recordings and publish them by themselves. While this requirement might be demanding, it would certainly afford a great learning experience. In editing recordings, students would listen to their own readings many times and learn how to handle the copyright issues regarding the use of music or sound effect. By experiencing the entire podcasting process, students would acquire a complete set of digital skills, which could be transferrable to the learning of other subject matter and future careers. Finally, it would be helpful if students were asked to write journals detailing their experience with the project and analyzing what is working and what is not. Having students reflect on the process would raise their hard and soft skills.

## Discussion and Conclusion

This paper describes an experiment that engages students taking the second part of an Introductory Chinese course with an assignment to create podcasts in the form of an interview. Promoting this kind of assignment as an interactive exchange between the creator and listener demonstrated potential in advancing student learning in the following ways: (1) elevating listening, speaking, and writing to the level of effective and interactive communicating with others; (2) fostering autonomous learning; (3) boosting learning motivation and confidence; and (4) cultivating social, emotional, and collaborative skills. The hands-on project enabled students to improve critical analysis, creativity, collaboration, and communication as well as digital literacy. Although their recordings were edited by a specialist, students had an opportunity to make a podcast from scratch. They explored how to express themselves in the target language authentically.

The present research demonstrates that requiring students to create Chinese podcasts while learning the language reflects some advantages of DH that align with what CALL can do — raising the efficiency of learners' language skills and confidence. Moreover, the process of completing the project enables students to improve their 21<sup>st</sup> century skills, which would be difficult to obtain through the basic CALL approach. DH contributes to the development of students' linguistic competency and other skills. The whole skill set is crucial for students to survive and thrive in a growingly competitive society.

It is this author's intent to show that, to conduct a more rigorous and engaging podcasting assignment, it is incumbent on the teacher to design his/her instructions so that students understand from the outset why and how the project is relevant to them. That is, a podcasting project in a language classroom should not be an end but a powerful means to a satisfying objective — that the student learns by enjoying the process. Curricular goals must be clarified with a game plan, just as a delicious meal needs a recipe to organize the ingredients.

This involves providing a rubric, walking through scripts with students, and requiring them to reflect on the process after the project is completed. Lomicka and Lord (2011) advocated that podcasting projects combine developing students' linguistic skills and digital literacy with meeting community needs. In the process, imbuing students' classroom experience with a social commitment to serve the community will simultaneously benefit all involved within and beyond the campus. Indeed, aligning "Digital" with "Humanities" implies that a truly great learning-teaching opportunity in both worlds is challenging and existentially authentic.

This study suggests that involving students in technology-supported projects like podcasting would be a promising direction for effective teaching of a language. However, due to limited data, further research is needed. In fact, there are many questions that remain to be examined.<sup>9</sup> For example, what are the disadvantages of DH as compared to CALL with respect to teaching Chinese as a second language? What are the areas that CALL can do while DH cannot? What are the relationships between CALL and DH? How does DH handle assessments? Will the learning benefits that were observed in the students of introductory Chinese as shown in this action research also occur in learners studying at higher levels? Would these benefits be confirmed in the students if they were administered a proficiency test before and after podcasting? What kind of linguistic skills can be facilitated by a term-long podcasting project? What language skills are difficult to be fostered by podcasting? Studies that address the above questions, and in particular, studies that adopt methods specially designed for achieving quantitative data, will provide an in-depth understanding of the two approaches, i.e., DH and CALL, regarding the goal, function, and impact for language learning.

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<sup>9</sup> Some of the questions were raised by an anonymous reviewer, whom the author thanks earnestly.



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