

How Teachers Use Podcasts to Improve English Skills

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This paper explains how numerous English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers in various countries use podcasts to improve their students' skills. A comprehensive review of the literature identified two widely-used pedagogical approaches: 1) Some teachers have students listen to popular podcasts outside of class, and then in class the students do various speaking and writing activities using the vocabulary and topics in the podcasts. 2) Other teachers have students create their own podcasts. Each of these techniques is explained in detail.

BACKGROUND

Theoretically, podcasts seem to be motivating and powerful tools for learning EFL (Walls et al., 2010; Rosell-Aguilar, 2007; Lewis, 2000). Studying English-learning podcasts conforms well to communicative approaches (interacting with the real world), behaviourist notions (listening and repeating), vocabulary learning theories (podcasts are based on certain themes such as the environment or sports, so words can be linked together), and lifelong learning theories (studying outside the classroom). Huge amounts of authentic materials are available, and students have the freedom to listen to them whenever and wherever they want. Fernandez et al. (2009) argue that the podcasting tool itself motivates students to study more.

Also, studies in neuroscience show that students who produce authentic oral language output learn things quickly (Bransford et al., 2000); and podcasts have great potential because students too can relatively easily produce them. When students talk to each other while making a podcast, there is collaborative dialog, metalinguistic reflection, and peer scaffolding, which are crucial components of efficient second language acquisition (Swain, 2006).

During the last 10 years, some applied linguistics studies have shown that podcasts seem to be effective tools for improving students' EFL skills. For example, in Saudi Arabia, Bamanger and Alhassan (2015) found that 55 male university students who listened to podcasts as supplementary, out-of-class materials, improved their writing abilities significantly more than a control group which did not listen to podcasts ($p < .05$). The main podcast program listened to was called Grammar Girl: Quick and Dirty Tricks for Better Writing. Also in Saudi Arabia, Al-Qasim and AL-Fadda (2013) found that female English majors who produced their own podcasts significantly improved their listening comprehension scores more than a group which did not produce podcasts.

In China, Yao and Zuo (2009) found that students listening to Voice of America Special English podcasts in classes for one semester saw "progress in their speaking and writing. The progress in turn built up their confidence and increased their engagement with these activities" (p. 31). But the Chinese researchers did not attempt to measure the progress quantitatively.

In the United States, Nguyen (2011) found that ESL learners, after using podcasts, significantly

improved their writing skills—particularly grammar— more than a control group which did not use podcasts. The greatest improvement between pre-course and post-course tests occurred with the use of prepositions.

In Japan, probably the most significant study was conducted by Lauer et al. (2016). Over one semester and involving 102 non-English major university freshmen, they found that students using podcasts significantly improved their listening scores by about 10% ($p < .05$) between TOEIC-type pre- and post-course tests. But the students did not significantly improve their scores on general vocabulary or grammar tests.

In another longitudinal study in Japan, Lauer and Enokida (2010) had nine volunteer university students listen to podcasts of their own choosing outside of any courses over a five-month period. The students, as a group, significantly improved their dictation scores ($p < .05$). Also, one student improved overall listening scores by 20%, and another improved overall listening scores by 14%, as measured by TOEIC-TOEFL-type questions. But as a group, there was no significant improvement in listening on these types of questions.

Shadowing seems to be an effective way to promote EFL acquisition (Hamada, 2011; Tamai, 2005), and some podcasts incorporate the technique (Lauer, 2015). In podcasts for lower-level students, “slash shadowing” is typically used, in which dialogs have pauses after each phrase so that students can orally repeat what was just heard. Lauer’s study found that non-English major freshmen strongly prefer these easier-to-understand podcasts.

Do most students these days actively choose to use podcasts to study EFL? The answer is clearly no. Lauer (2013) found that only 21% of surveyed second-semester freshmen had ever listened to an English podcast of any type. And, those who did sometimes listen to English podcasts spent an average of only about 30 minutes per week with the activity. In another study, Walls et al. (2010), in contrast to the Fernandez et al. (2009) study cited above, claimed that the podcasting tool itself is not exciting enough to motivate the majority of students to study on their own.

Leis et al. (2018) claimed that a weak point of podcasts is that most of them have no closed captions, so students become frustrated when they do not understand. Multiple studies have found the use of closed captions promotes comprehension and vocabulary acquisition (e.g., Lee, 2017; Hosoguchi, 2016; Perez et al., 2013). Thus, some podcasts, such as Hiroshima University English Podcast, have recently overcome this by incorporating closed captions (Enokida, 2017).

Those students who do listen to English podcasts have generally reported that they are worthwhile and enjoyable experiences. In Spain, Perez et al. (2011) had students listen to podcasts, and the students reported mostly positive feelings. In Japan, Lauer (2009) found that 90% of university students rated the English podcasts that they listened to as being either *good* or *very good*. Yet, to summarize, even though students often say they like listening to podcasts, they do not seem to listen to them very often, perhaps because most students do not really like studying English so much.

Alas, little research has focused on exactly what the teachers are having the students do in classes. Therefore, the goal of this paper is to clarify many teachers’ approaches to using podcasts.

METHOD AND RESULTS

The author did an extensive review of the literature, and also communicated by email with university teachers in eight countries/regions to determine if and how they use podcasts to improve students’ English skills. The eight places were Japan, the United States, Spain, Peru, Indonesia, Taiwan, Vietnam, and Australia.

Those places were chosen because the researcher had contacts there. One question was asked: “Do you or your colleagues use podcasts in your courses, and if so, how?” The survey was conducted in September–October, 2018.

Especially the review of the literature showed that most English teachers around the world do not seem to utilize podcasts in their syllabuses, usually because they do not know about the potentials of podcasts, and/or because they are required to follow syllabuses delineated by leaders in their programs. Instances of the latter reason were found by the current researcher in the email exchanges with teachers in Japan, Vietnam, Indonesia and Peru. Celik (2013) in Turkey similarly stated that podcast usage in that country’s schools was still rare. In Japan, Thomas and Toland (2015) suggested that the low number of conference presentations and the lack of research dealing with podcasts probably reflect sparse use of the tool by teachers everywhere.

But among those teachers who do use podcasts, it was found that two pedagogical approaches are widely used in attempts to improve students’ EFL skills. In one method, teachers assign podcasts as homework, and then somehow teach or reinforce the podcast contents in classroom activities. The other method has students make their own English podcasts.

Podcasts as Homework

In Japan, one of the leaders in producing and using podcasts is Jaime Selwood of Hiroshima University (personal communication, October 2, 2018). For about 10 years, he has produced a podcast called English News Weekly, which features slow English and is accompanied by comprehensive on-line support materials. During the first half of a semester-long course, he typically has students study assigned podcasts, but during the second half of a course he gives students more freedom to study whatever podcasts they want, including BBC productions such as The English We Speak Podcast and 6 Minute English Podcast. Each week students do a lot of small-group activities, studying the vocabulary and the topics in the podcasts. The pedagogical approach is centered upon anchoring the language contained within each podcast in frequently-used English words, phrases, and pronunciations. According to Selwood, one of the biggest errors in language learning is that many activities contain language constructs that simplify— in the false belief that they will create an easier learning environment. However, the result is that when students leave the classroom they soon encounter language and pronunciation they are unfamiliar with, he wrote. One of the aims of the podcast, stated Selwood, is to not shy away from language and pronunciation that is reflected in the real world.

Also in Japan, Gromik (2008) had two college students in an Advanced English Multimedia course watch various video podcasts, and the students had to fill out daily questionnaires about their podcast use. Among the findings were that students preferred to just “enjoy the content” (p.55) rather than to take notes. He also found that students used the podcasts only once or twice per week, usually only 30 minutes per listening. The students usually used the podcasts when commuting to and from school. The students’ favorite podcasts were “English education programs” (p.56), followed by CNN and BBC news podcasts. He concluded that, due to the podcast activities, the students became more “responsible for their own learning” (p.58), but this study did not try to measure linguistic gains.

Gromik (personal communication, September 20, 2018), now an ESL instructor in Australia, remarked that he recently likes to use video podcasts designed for students in specific fields, such as engineering or medicine. He said the best podcasts are less than five minutes in length and are spoken at slow speed. He

encouraged teachers to, as much as possible, let students choose the podcasts which match their particular levels and interests.

Simon Capper at the Japanese Red Cross Hiroshima College of Nursing (personal communication, October 3, 2018) stated that he uses podcasts as part of his first-year Basic Seminar in Academic / Language Learning Skills course. First, he tells students about podcasts and demonstrates examples of the ones that he uses. Then, he sets them a task to find some interesting podcasts, and strongly urges them to listen to these podcasts regularly over a period of about three months. At the end of this period he makes them review five podcasts, and (in a later class) he has them introduce their most highly-rated or recommended podcast in a short (4-5 minute) presentation. The goal of the course is to encourage students to develop autonomy. The ease of use and flexibility of podcast listening is, he said, the best and least effortful way for students to incorporate English into their daily routines.

A teacher at Miyagi University of Education in Japan named Adrian Leis (personal communication, October 3, 2018) wrote that he sometimes uses podcasts in public speaking courses. The podcasts are chosen by the teacher as complementary or supporting materials for discussions in the course. In a semi-flipped learning fashion, students are required to listen to the podcast before class and think about discussion topics which are undertaken in class. During the lesson itself, the teacher starts with a quiz to check their understanding, then briefly explains what the podcast was about with discussions woven in throughout the class. Because he uses Google Classroom for lesson management, he can easily distribute the links for the podcasts as well as the transcripts. He says the transcripts are essential.

Finally in Japan, the current author, Lauer, for the last 11 years, has led the production of Hiroshima University English Podcast, and has also used podcasts extensively in courses. In lower level classes, certain podcasts are assigned as homework, and then the following pedagogical pattern is followed. First, using PowerPoint, key vocabulary items in the podcasts are introduced, and students do some choral repetition of example sentences. Then, in pairs, students are given lists of questions composed of key words from the podcasts, and students ask each other questions. Finally, the students play various vocabulary games or quiz games, such as Jeopardy, based on the contents of the podcasts. In conversation courses, to test the abilities of students, they are given lists of words from the podcasts, and with a partner they need to ask each other questions for a few minutes. In all courses ranging from intermediate to advanced, students have a lot of freedom in choosing whichever podcasts they want to listen to. The students write down key expressions which they hear, and then, in small groups, they tell other students about the vocabulary and the topics in the podcasts.

Outside of Japan in classroom research, Perez et al. (2011) had college students in Spain listen to BBC's 6 Minute English podcasts and share their experiences on blogs. Groups of five students each chose to listen to podcasts of their choice, and then interacted with their classmates, writing about the podcast contents and vocabulary. Every week teachers posed questions about the podcasts in the blogs. The students reported mostly positive feelings toward the assignment.

Also in Spain at the Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Zamorano-Mansilla (personal communication, October 8, 2018) remarked that he likes to use podcasts in two types of courses: a world-Englishes pronunciation course, and an EFL course for pharmacy students. In each pronunciation lesson, the teacher plays podcasts featuring specific varieties of English accents, and the students concentrate on the

pronunciations rather than the contents. Then, the students do various pronunciation activities which have been created by the teacher in Moodle. In the pharmacy class as homework, the teacher has the students listen to podcasts based on relevant topics, such as alcoholism, sugar, and antibiotics. Then in class there are listening comprehension activities, again created with Moodle.

In China, Yao and Zuo (2009) had learners listen to Voice of America Special English podcasts, prepare reports, and then present the reports in class. The teachers put emphasis on studying collocations in the podcasts, and strongly discouraged word-for-word translations. In each class, students typically engaged in the following procedure: A) First, they listened to a podcast three times without the script, taking notes of key words and collocations; B) In pairs, students discussed the words, collocations, and podcast topic; C) Students then listened to the podcast two more times with the script projected on the front screen, focusing on key collocations; D) Students did oral exercises in pairs, such as asking questions; E) Lastly, students did either the fluency-oriented 4/3/2 activity (Nation, 2001), in which students switch among three partners and tell the same story in decreasing amounts of time (i.e., four, three, and two minutes), or wrote as much as they could about the report for 15 minutes. As homework, students listened to podcasts, kept vocabulary notebooks, and prepared oral and written reports. In one semester, the researchers claimed that the Chinese students' English speaking and writing abilities improved, as did their confidence and engagement with the materials.

Finally, Fox (2008) in Denmark conducted a short survey of how teachers use podcasts in EFL classes, noting many possible activities. Among Fox's recommendations not mentioned by other researchers above are having students listen while looking at pre-prepared teacher glossaries, using portions of podcasts as dictation practice, and having students write relevant comments on the blogs which almost always accompany the podcasts. Today, Fox and a colleague, Elmar-Laurent Borgmann at the University of Applied Science in Koblenz, Germany, produce a high-quality twice-a-month podcast called Absolutely Intercultural.

Student- and Teacher-Produced Podcasts

It is not so difficult for students to produce and upload their own podcasts. They can use their smartphones to record MP3 audio files, edit the files with free apps such as Garageband, and upload the files onto a server. For a clear explanation on how to help students make their own podcasts, see Vincent (2018).

Phillips (2017) cites many advantages to having students make English-learning podcasts, and gives useful suggestions for in-class activities. She argues that the collaborative learning which occurs when students make a podcast in a small group efficiently improves ESL skills. She also claims that the activity helps students develop transferable skills which are needed in the modern-day professional world. In-class activities include podcast competitions, in which students vote on the best group-produced podcasts, with prizes going to the winners, and digital story-telling, in which students make podcasts as individuals.

Lebron-Lozada (2012) also claimed that when students produced their own podcasts, there were fewer mistakes, better pronunciation, and more fluent speech. Similarly, with students aged 14-16 at the British Council in Madrid (cited in Fox, 2008), Evans had students make podcasts and got positive results. Al-Qasim and AL-Fadda (2013) had students writing dialogs and making podcasts in small groups; the podcasts, each 2-5 minutes long, supplemented a text based on listening strategies, such as asking for confirmation, making predictions, and summarizing.

Selwood of Hiroshima University had students produce their own podcasts with the central aim of

placing the student in a more proactive role in his or her own language-learning process (personal communication, October 2, 2018). Students who have been given complete freedom with a topic and are allowed the opportunity to explore colloquial English constructs, Selwood stated, gain more from their language-learning process. He wrote that students who have the opportunity to select topics of their own interest, whatever that might be, enjoy the process of creating a podcast more than if the instructor has limited their choice in some way.

Teachers can also produce podcasts for their particular classes. For example, Thomas and Toland (2015) at Osaka Prefecture University and Ritsumeikan University in Japan produced short audio files containing reviews of class materials and homework guidance. The researchers claimed that since the files were very relevant to the lessons, students paid attention to them. Similarly, Fernandez et al. (2009) found that such files improved relationships between students and teachers. McKinney et al. (2009) and Kurtz et al. (2007) found that students who received podcast lectures as tools to review lessons scored significantly higher on tests than control groups which just had ordinary classroom lessons.

CONCLUSION

The survey described in this paper is, admittedly, limited to a couple of dozen instances of how teachers in various countries use podcasts in ESL/EFL classes. But, hopefully, it has given readers a glimpse of the current situation. In the future, it is important for teachers to research exactly which activities are the most effective for learning English.

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ABSTRACT

How Teachers Use Podcasts to Improve English Skills

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This paper delineates how various English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers around the world use podcasts to improve their students' skills. A comprehensive review of the literature and a series of email exchanges identified two widely-used pedagogical approaches: 1) Some teachers have students listen to popular podcasts outside of class, and then in class the students do various speaking and writing activities using the vocabulary and topics in the podcasts. 2) Other teachers have students create their own podcasts. Each of these techniques is explained in detail.

要 約

英語能力を向上するために先生たちのポッドキャストの使い方

ジョー・ラウアー

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本稿の目的は、世界中の様々な ESL（第二言語としての英語）および EFL（外国語としての英語）教員たちが、学生の英語技能向上のために、ポッドキャストをどのように利用しているかを明らかにすることである。包括的な文献調査と email のやり取りを通じた調査によって、広く行われている 2 つの教育上のアプローチが明らかとなった。(1) 人気の高いポッドキャストの視聴を宿題として課し、授業中に当該ポッドキャストにある単語やテーマを使ったスピーキングやライティングの課題を課す。(2) 学生たちに、小グループで自分達自身の手によるポッドキャスト作成を課す。本稿では、それぞれの方法について詳しく説明する。