

# English Podcasts: The State of the Art

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Podcasts are an invigorating way for Japanese students to improve their English skills. For virtually no money, students can download English-learning programs into their computers or portable listening devices. The programs are both fun and educational, ranging from cross-culture discussions to interesting grammar talks. Students can often study those programs by utilizing accompanying scripts, exercises, or video images, and they can listen to the programs wherever they want, whenever they want, and as often as they want.

But which podcast programs are the best for students learning English in Japan today? The current study analyzes 57 podcasting sites. It is found, for example, that some of the best sites for intermediate-level learners are The Daily English Show, ECC 英会話 Podcasting, Let's Read the Nikkei Weekly, Gaba G Style, VOA Special English, BBC World Service: 6-Minute English, and Weblish: メディア英会話. Hiroshima University's English Podcast, which has been rated highly in past studies, is not included in this ranking because it would have been objectively difficult to do so.

## BACKGROUND

Most podcast formats seem to effectively follow from theoretical notions concerning how people successfully learn foreign languages (Rosell-Aguilar, 2007). For example, communicative approaches say that people learn effectively when the materials require students to interact with the real world; likewise, podcast materials are usually very authentic, are usually studied outside the classroom, and students have control over them. Behaviorist notions also would advocate podcasts as tools because there is a lot of listening and oral repetition involved. Lifelong learning theories imply that podcasts are good because they are usually studied outside the classroom and are embedded in real life. Finally, podcasts flow well from chunking theory, because individual podcasts are usually based on themes—such as the environment, or sports, or music—so vocabulary items are meaningfully grouped and can be learned easier.

But are podcasts really effective in improving English skills? At Hiroshima University in recent years, several studies have been conducted to determine an answer.

The most important research involved a longitudinal study carried out by Lauer & Enokida (2010). This study tried to determine if listening to English-learning podcasts correlates with higher TOEFL-TOEIC-Dictation test scores. Nine motivated Japanese university students with an average TOEIC score of 564 (SD=155) listened to whatever English podcasts they liked, whenever they liked during a five-month period. The students sent short, weekly e-mail reports to the researchers, describing how much and in what ways they were listening to podcasts. Fifty-item listening tests were given to the students at the beginning of the

experiment, five months later at the end, and then a follow-up test was given two months later to determine if they retained knowledge. The study included a control group, and the researchers checked to see how parallel the three tests were.

It was found that the nine students, as a group, did not improve their overall listening skills significantly during the five-month period, improving an average of only 3.6%. Some students got slightly better scores while other students got slightly worse scores. But a couple of students seemed to have significantly improved. The overall improvement was not significantly different from that of the control group.

On dictation, however, significant improvement was noticed ( $p < .05$ ). Podcast students got a total of 63% correct on Test 1, but improved to 76% on Test 2. The control group, meanwhile, got 76% of the dictation words correct on Test 1, and improved to 79% on Test 2.

Another important finding in this study concerned how the students listened to podcasts from May to October. Even though they were relatively motivated to learn English—they had volunteered for the project—most students listened to podcasts only one to three hours per week. Ironically, two of the weaker TOEIC students (Chizoko and Yuka) used podcasts the most, while one of the stronger TOEIC students (Takahiro) used them the least. Interestingly, the listening scores of Chizoko and Yuka went up, while Takahiro's score went down.

The students who seemed to improve their listening scores the most during the study were Nami, Masayuki, and Yuka. Nami recorded a remarkable 20% improvement between Test 1 and Test 2, and Masayuki improved 14% while Yuka went up 6% between the same two exactly parallel tests. The first two students did not spend a tremendous amount of time listening to podcasts, averaging only one or two hours per week. But when they did listen, they seemed to be “active listeners”, often doing either shadowing or note-taking. The third student (Yuka) listened fairly often, averaging about five hours per week. The one senior citizen in the study, Chizoko, aged 60, listened very diligently, but seemed to fail in significantly raising her listening scores.

One likely reason for the lack of overall progress on the TOEFL-TOEIC sections of the test is that those types of questions do not seem to correspond to skills learned in podcasts. Another reason why most of the students probably did not improve much is that most of them only chose to listen to English podcasts a couple of hours per week.

Another study tried to measure the attitudes of students toward English-learning podcasts (Lauer, 2009). A total of 83 Japanese university freshmen listened to a variety of English-learning podcasts. It was found that an amazing 90% of students rated the podcasts they listened to as being either very good or good. Specifically, 36% of all students rated them as *very good*, and 54% of all students rated them *good*.

Alas, another study found that, in reality, students do not listen to podcasts very often. (Lauer, 2008). In this study, 298 college students were polled about their podcasting habits and desires. It was found that only 10% had ever listened to podcasts of any type, and only 5% had ever listened to English-learning podcasts.

Outside of Hiroshima University, very few studies have been conducted to determine the

effectiveness of English-learning podcasts. The only other known longitudinal study pertaining to this question was conducted by Gromik (2008). During one semester, two advanced students kept a diary of podcast-listening activities, and the two students were repeatedly interviewed. It was concluded that podcasts effectively stimulated the students “to be responsible for their own learning.” But that study did not attempt to measure linguistic gains.

Yao and Zuo (2009) found that using Voice of America Special English in classes improved Chinese students’ English speaking and writing abilities.

Finally and importantly, another study asked: Which are the best podcasts? (Lauer, 2008) Almost 80 English-learning podcast sites were evaluated. The best podcasts for intermediate-level Japanese learners of English were determined to be Weblish: *メデイア英会話*, the Daily English Show, *英会話 e-chat Vancouver*, English Journal, ECC *英会話 Podcasting*, Voice of America Special English, and the Nikkei Weekly Interview. The best podcasts were said to have Japanese support, full transcripts, comprehension exercises, longer files, and rich archives. Video podcasts received some of the highest scores in the study.

## THE PRESENT STUDY

The current research attempts to determine which are the best podcasts for learners of English in Japan today. The study is an important updating of the research which was conducted three years ago (Lauer, 2008). Because of the fast-changing nature of Internet sites, this new image of the state of the art hopefully will be helpful for both English teachers and students of the language.

This time, a total of 57 English-learning podcasts, which are available on the Internet free of charge, were evaluated. (The parts of programs which cost money were not examined, and a few sites which have been discontinued or were obviously of poor quality are not included here.) The judge (the current researcher), who has been teaching English in Japanese universities for over 20 years, considered students’ interests and needs. Utilizing all of the above research findings, the following evaluation criteria were established:

Category 1—hereafter, C1) Interesting and Pedagogically Sound = 40% of the Score. The podcasts were given up to 40 points if they were judged to be appealing and educationally valuable for intermediate-level young Japanese adults learning English. Conversation speed was also a part of this category, with lower-level students needing slower speeds by the podcast hosts and dialog participants.

C2—Japanese support = 15% of the score. If the podcast had both audio and written Japanese notes, it could receive up to 15 points. If there was only Japanese audio, it received about 10 points. In this category, as in the others, both quantity and quality were considered.

C3—English transcripts = 15% of the score. Thus, up to 15 points were awarded.

C4—Vocabulary-Grammar Explanations and Worksheets = 10% of the Score. The amounts and appropriateness of the support materials were examined. Up to 10 points were given.

C5—Ample Archives = 15% of the score = If there were at least 20 files available through iTunes, and new podcasts were produced frequently, the podcast received up to 15 points.

C6—Moderately Long Listening Files = 5% of the Score. Shorter files are less appealing because listeners are often troubled when they have to listen to many short files. So, if the files were usually about 20 minutes long, they received 5 points. Those of shorter length received appropriately lower scores.

See the Appendix for a list of all the podcasts which were evaluated. In the results below, Web addresses are not cited, because any person can easily find the site within seconds by typing the name of the program into the “Search” function at iTunes Store, located within the iTunes software. Each podcast was classified into one of the following categories: a) Lower Level, b) Intermediate Level, b) Higher Level, c) Video, d) Business.

## RESULTS

### Best Audio Podcasts for Lower-Level Students

Number of podcasts in this category evaluated = 7

	Name	Comments
1	Machigai Podcast	Discussions about tricky grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation; for example, l and r. An American man and a Japanese woman talk. Especially aimed at the high school English level. 5-10 min. <u>Good points:</u> Humorous. Lots of audio Japanese support. Slower. Nice homepage. <u>Weak points:</u> Almost no script.
2	CNN English Express: 毎日ちょこっと リスニング特訓	Appeals to all ages. 3 times per week. 2-3 min files. <u>Good points:</u> Well made. <u>Weak points:</u> Files too short, so lack of context not so interesting. Maybe too much Japanese too?

### Best Audio Podcasts for Intermediate-Level Students

Number of podcasts in this category evaluated = 25

	Name	Comments
1	ECC 英会話 Podcasting	Idioms used in conversations. Low-intermediate level. Script on line. Weekly. 10-20 min. <u>Good points:</u> Interesting for young Japanese. Extensive archive. <u>Weak points:</u> A bit too much advertising.
2	VOA Special English	Various series, including 30-min News, 15-min Features, Wordmaster, etc. The VOA Idiom Dictionary is especially interesting. <u>Good points:</u> Comprehensive transcripts read at a nice slow speed. <u>Weak points:</u> Hard vocabulary with no Japanese support.
3	BBC World Service: 6-Minute English	Talks about culture and language. Weekly. <u>Good points:</u> High-quality recordings. Complete transcripts. <u>Weak points:</u> No Japanese support.
4	Eigotown Podcasting	Various series, including a recent one entitled 恋人たちの英会話, 5-10 min. <u>Good points:</u> Interesting. Japanese support and complete transcripts. <u>Weak points:</u> Archives are too small.

	Name	Comments
5	Breaking News English	Slow reading of the news. Especially British topics. Comes out twice weekly. <u>Good points:</u> Excellent online vocabulary exercises, with answers. Complete transcripts. <u>Weak points:</u> Only one person reading, so not so exciting.
6	TOEIC Presents: English Upgrader	Practice listening exercises. <u>Good points:</u> High-quality recording. Japanese support and transcripts. <u>Weak points:</u> TOEIC not so interesting. Comes out only periodically, and archives limited. Too many TOEIC promos.
7	日米会話 学院	Nice dialogs at slower speed. 5-10 min. <u>Good points:</u> Mostly only English. Transcripts on line. <u>Weak points:</u> Some learners prefer Japanese support. Comes out irregularly.
8	The English Teacher John Show	Real-life recordings, produced in Matsumoto. 10-30-min. <u>Good points:</u> Natural conversations. English transcripts. Extensive archive. <u>Weak points:</u> Almost no Japanese support. Just a few podcasts per year.
9	英語をモノにする podcast	Japanese man reading news, with lots of links to VOA. Weekly. 3-5 min. <u>Good points:</u> Nice bilingual explanation, and most transcripts on line. <u>Weak points:</u> One person reading is sometimes boring.
10	エイゴの時間	Japanese woman talking about language used in movies. <u>Good points:</u> Nice Japanese support and English transcripts online. Audio is all English. <u>Weak points:</u> A bit boring. Files short. No Japanese audio.
11	BBC Learning English: Talk about English	Weekly topics about vocabulary. <u>Good points:</u> Complete transcripts. <u>Weak points:</u> 2-min files are too short. One person speaking maybe not so interesting. No Japanese. Series ended in late 2010.
12	Listen to English-Learn English	One older man talks at slow speed about British culture. Weekly. 5 min. <u>Good points:</u> High-quality topics. Full transcripts. Some vocabulary notes. <u>Weak points:</u> May be boring for young people.

### Best Audio Podcasts for Higher-Level Students

Number of podcasts in this category evaluated = 12

	Name	Comments
1	British Council: Elementary Podcast	Says "Elementary" but it is advanced, because the language speed is fast. Monthly. 20-30 min. <u>Good points:</u> High-quality talks about British culture and language. Vocabulary exercises and transcripts. <u>Weak points:</u> No Japanese support.
2	Eiken Times: めざせ1級リスニングで高める英語力II	Listening practice for the Eiken's highest level. 10-20 min. <u>Good points:</u> Well-made. <u>Weak points:</u> Archive is small. Need to pay for some transcript-like materials.
3	Language- caster	Excellent if you like soccer, but very boring if you do not. Made in Tokyo. Usually weekly. 5-15 min. <u>Good points:</u> Vocabulary exercises and transcripts. <u>Weak points:</u> Almost no Japanese support.

	Name	Comments
4	Splendid Speaking	Advanced speaking skills, such as giving formal presentations. Scripts free by e-mail but must sign up. Couple of times per month. 5-15 min. <u>Good points:</u> Well-made, with various accents. <u>Weak points:</u> No Japanese support.
5	ESLpod.com's Guide to the TOEFL	Listening practice for the TOEFL. 15-20 min. <u>Good points:</u> Well-made, with sometimes slow speed. Transcripts. <u>Weak points:</u> Stopped producing 4 years ago.
6	The Bob & Rob Show	A British man and an American man talk about a wide range of topics. 25 min. <u>Good points:</u> Made in Japan. Transcripts and some vocabulary explanations. <u>Weak points:</u> Almost no Japanese support. Stopped in 2008.

### Best Video Podcasts

Number of podcasts in this category evaluated = 8

	Name	Comments
1	The Daily English Show	Fun talks about culture and language. Produced in New Zealand. 5 min. <u>Good points:</u> Has a lot of Japanese support and topics about Japan. Transcripts. Big archive. Some vocabulary exercises. <u>Weak points:</u> Japanese support is not daily.
2	Gaba G Style	High-quality dialogs. Weekly. 10-15 min. <u>Good points:</u> Oriented toward young people in Japan. <u>Weak points:</u> Transcripts not downloadable.
3	Weblish: メディア英会話	Very funny. 5 min. <u>Good points:</u> Topics based on Japanese interests. Appropriate subtitles. <u>Weak points:</u> Comes out only a few times per year. Transcripts not downloadable.
4	Station81.com: 日常英会話	Flashiness appeals to college students. 5-8 min. <u>Good points:</u> Japanese support. Big archive. <u>Weak points:</u> Transcripts not downloadable. Stopped producing in 2009.

### Best Business Podcasts for Intermediate-Level Students

Number of podcasts in this category evaluated = 7

	Name	Comments
1	Let's Read the Nikkei Weekly	Bilingual Japanese woman talking with foreigners about the newspaper's contents (but buying the paper is not really needed.) Weekly. 30 min. <u>Good points:</u> Lots of Japanese support, including word lists. <u>Weak points:</u> Ads, and too much Japanese? Maybe too difficult for most intermediate-level learners.
2	British Council: Learn English: Professional Podcasts	High-quality business talks. 3-5 min. Comes out irregularly. <u>Good points:</u> Complete transcripts and some vocabulary exercises. Nice archive. <u>Weak points:</u> No Japanese support. Too hard for intermediate learners.

	Name	Comments
3	Ken's Café: 英検と 遠山顕	For Step BULATS business test. Two types: Idioms (7 min) and Interviews (25 min). About twice per week. <u>Good points:</u> Idiom talk has Japanese support and transcripts. <u>Weak points:</u> Idioms not used so much in real life. Interviews have almost no written support.
4	Business English Pod	Comprehensive. Uses Youtube for some writing and grammar lessons. Some transcripts. Weekly. 20 min. <u>Good points:</u> Well-made. <u>Weak points:</u> No Japanese support. Most written notes cost money.

#### Special Category:

Hiroshima University's English Podcast	<u>Note:</u> This podcast was not ranked above, because the producer is also this researcher, so it could not be evaluated objectively. The audio podcast continues to be published every week. For details on this podcast, see Lauer (2009) and Enokida (2010).
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## CONCLUSIONS

Overall, the number of podcasts readily usable for intermediate-level learners in Japan seems to have decreased slightly compared to the study three years ago (Lauer, 2008), declining from about 80 to about 60. Lower level podcasts seem to be particularly lacking, with only two sites—Machigai Podcast and CNN English Express: 毎日ちょこっとリスニング特訓—being well-regarded in this study.

At the intermediate level, the quality is generally better, with ECC 英会話Podcasting and The Daily English Show capturing the top spots for the second consecutive study. The ECC site has exciting dialogs and excellent Japanese support. The Daily English Show has interesting lessons in video images. Gaba G Style, VOA Special English, BBC World Service: 6-Minute English, and Weblish: メディア英会話 also have high-quality intermediate level-products. For business-oriented students, Let's Read the Nikkei Weekly is very good.

Finally, it should be noted that Hiroshima University's English Podcast was not evaluated here. But if compared, it would probably have ranked relatively high.

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#### Appendix: Points Awarded for Each Evaluation Criterion

C1= Interesting and Pedagogically Sound for the average Japanese learner of English at the intermediate level (Max.=40 points); C2 = Japanese Support (Max.=15); C3 = English Transcripts (Max.=15); C4 = Vocabulary-Grammar Explanations and Worksheets (Max.=10); C5 = Ample Archives (Max.=15); C6 = Moderately long Listening Files (Max.=5).

Name	C1	C2	C3	C4	C5	C6	Score
1) Alex's English Rush	20	3	15	3	4	2	47
2) American English Pronunciation	17	0	15	0	15	3	50
3) The Bardwell Road Centre Podcast	20	0	4	0	5	3	32
4) BBC Learning English: Talk about English	20	0	15	5	15	0	55
5) BBC World Service: 6-Minute English	35	0	15	0	15	2	67
6) BetteratEnglish.com	22	0	15	5	10	3	55
7) The Bob & Rob Show	26	0	15	5	5	5	56
8) Breaking News English	20	0	15	10	15	2	62
9) British Council: Elementary Podcast	28	0	15	10	15	5	73
10) British Council: Learn English: Professional Podcasts	35	0	15	10	15	2	77
11) Business English Pod	31	0	5	0	15	5	61
12) CNN English Express: 毎日ちょこっとリスニング特訓	20	15	15	0	15	1	66
13) CNN Student News	15	0	15	2	15	4	51
14) CuLips ESL Podcast	15	0	0	0	15	4	34
15) The Daily English Show	33	12	15	5	15	3	83
16) David先生の英語リスニングルーム: eigolistening.com	20	5	10	0	8	3	46
17) ECC 英会話Podcasting	30	15	15	3	15	5	83
18) Eigotown Podcasting	25	15	15	3	3	2	63
19) Eiken Times: めざせ1級リスニングで高める 英語力II	32	10	10	0	5	5	62
20) ELT Podcast: Basic and Intermediate	28	0	15	0	2	2	47
21) English Aya Pod	10	3	0	0	15	3	31
22) English in the Real World	18	0	5	0	5	5	33
23) English Pronunciation Podcast	12	0	15	0	12	2	41



Name	C1	C2	C3	C4	C5	C6	Score
24) The English Teacher John Show	30	1	15	0	7	5	58
25) ESL Aloud	17	0	12	0	15	4	48
26) ESL Pod	15	0	0	0	15	5	35
27) ESLpod.com's Guide to the TOEFL	32	0	15	0	5	5	57
28) Fun English Lessons: China232.com	8	0	15	2	10	3	38
29) Gaba G Style	34	15	10	0	15	4	78
30) Genki English	19	10	10	0	4	1	44
31) goFluent's English in the Real World	18	0	0	0	10	2	30
32) Grammar Girl Quick and Dirty Tips for Better Writing	20	0	15	0	15	4	54
33) GTB-Cast	20	3	5	0	3	3	34
34) Just Vocabulary	20	0	12	0	15	4	51
35) Ken's Café: 英検と遠山顕	20	15	10	0	15	4	64
36) Languagecaster	14	3	15	10	15	4	61
37) Language Dog	18	15	10	2	5	4	54
38) Let's Read the Nikkei Weekly	25	10	15	10	15	5	80
39) Listen to English-Learn English	20	0	15	2	15	2	54
40) Luke's English Podcast	18	0	10	0	12	3	43
41) Machigai Podcast	34	10	0	5	15	3	67
42) Matt's Today in History	20	0	15	0	10	5	50
43) Melinda's ESL for Work	10	0	15	0	2	2	29
44) My English Office	25	0	0	0	5	3	33
45) NHK World Radio Japan: English	18	2	0	0	15	5	40
46) Nikkei Weekly Interview and Time Magazine Series: eigoTown (business)	20	10	0	0	5	5	40
47) Speaking English Podcast	10	0	0	0	15	3	28
48) Splendid Speaking	29	0	10	5	10	4	58
49) Station81.com: 日常英会話	27	15	10	0	8	3	63
50) TOEIC Presents: English Upgrader	22	15	15	0	5	3	60
51) VOA Special English	34	0	15	5	15	5	74
52) VoiceTrek: Cross Culture Seminar	25	10	0	0	15	3	53
53) Weblish: メディア英会話	36	10	10	0	7	2	65
54) 英語をモノにするpodcast	12	15	12	0	15	3	57
55) エイゴの時間	9	15	15	0	15	2	56
56) 基礎英語シリーズ	10	0	0	0	15	2	27
57) 日米会話学院	32	0	15	0	10	2	59

## 要 約

### 英語学習のためのポッドキャストーその現状ー

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英語学習用ポッドキャストは、自らの英語力を向上させようとする日本人学生を激励するような学習方法である。学生たちは、英語学習プログラムを、コンピュータや携帯用の音声再生装置（例えば携帯電話や i-Pod など）に、事実上無料でダウンロードできる。それらのプログラムは、異文化間の議論から興味深い文法談義にわたり、おもしろく、かつ教育的である。学生たちは、多くの場合、付随するスクリプト、練習問題、あるいはビデオ画像を利用することによって、それらのプログラムを学習できる。学習者はそれらのプログラムをいつでもどこでも好きなだけ聴くことができる。

しかしながら、今日、日本で英語を学習する学生にとって、どのポッドキャストプログラムが最も良いであろうか。本論文では57のポッドキャストサイトを分析した。その結果分かったことの一例を挙げれば、中級レベル学習者にとって、最も良いポッドキャストとして、The Daily English Show, ECC 英会話 Podcasting, Let's Read the Nikkei Weekly, Gaba G Style, VOA Special English, BBC World Service: 6-Minute English, および Weblish: メディア英会話を挙げる事ができる。なお、Hiroshima University's English Podcast は、過去の研究で高く評価されたが、客観的に評価するのが難しいであろうと思われたので、今回の研究ではランキングに含めなかった。