

The English Podcast Habits of Students

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The English podcast listening habits of 224 Hiroshima University students were surveyed at the beginning of the fall semester in 2012. Most of the students were freshmen from a variety of faculties, representing both genders relatively equally.

It was found that only 21% of all the students ($N = 48$) had ever listened to an English-learning podcast of any type. Twenty-two of these students answered a detailed survey in Japanese, and most of them indicated that they did not listen to podcasts very much, only averaging about 30 minutes per week.

But these disappointing findings were offset by the fact that the podcast users did indeed like certain aspects of podcasts. For example, among the 22 students who answered the questionnaire, fairly large numbers of students said that they found podcasts dealing with current events to be interesting ($N = 6$), and that the slow speeds of English in podcasts were helpful ($N = 13$). Several students used proactive techniques while listening, such as taking notes and speaking out loud. Nearly 80% ($N = 17$) of podcast users said that their English skills had increased “moderately” thanks to podcasts.

These findings indicate that teachers need to tell their students more about the benefits of listening to English podcasts. Also, podcast producers need to produce more podcasts which meet the desires and needs of students.

BACKGROUND

Podcasts are an innovative and effective way for Japanese students to improve their English skills. For virtually no money, students can download English-learning programs into their computers, smart phones, and iPods. The programs range from lower-level lessons revolving around dialogs, to higher-level culture discussions and grammar talks. Often there are accompanying scripts, exercises, and video images. Students can listen to the programs whenever they want, wherever they want, and as often as they want.

Theoretically speaking, podcast formats seem to conform very well to notions about how people successfully learn foreign languages. (See Rosell-Aguilar, 2007, for a review of the literature.) For instance, communicative approaches say that people learn effectively when materials require students to interact with the real world; likewise, podcast materials center around interesting topics, are usually authentic, and can be controlled by students. Behaviorist notions also would advocate podcasts as tools because there are a lot of listening and oral repetitions 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 tend to be based on themes—such as the

environment, sports, or music—so vocabulary items are meaningfully grouped and can be learned more efficiently.

Most importantly, students need to be proactive in order to improve their foreign language listening skills (Vandergrift & Goh, 2012; Miyake, S., 2009), and podcasts seem to be conducive to this. For example, students need to engage in metacognitive activities such as guessing word meanings in context, focusing on specific semantic and phonological phenomena in order to learn about those traits, and undertaking writing and speaking activities as they listen. Students need to try to guess what they will hear, based on their prior linguistic and general knowledge about the world. If their interpretations of the audio texts are insufficient, they have to figure out exactly where the problem is. Anxiety levels need to be as low as possible. Podcasts, in a relaxing atmosphere, allow students to be very proactive.

Some evidence shows that podcasts help improve English skills. Lauer and Enokida (2010) conducted a longitudinal study with nine Japanese university students over a five-month period. Students, as a group, significantly improved their dictation scores ($p < .05$). One student improved overall English listening skills by 20%, and another improved overall listening skills by 14%, as measured by TOEIC-TOEFL-type questions. But as a group, there was no significant overall improvement on these types of questions. Gromik (2008) also performed a longitudinal study, and found that two students in Japan who listened to English podcasts “became more responsible for their own learning,” but this study did not try to measure linguistic gains.

Outside of Japan, Perez et. al (2011) had Spanish students listen to podcasts and share their experiences on blogs. The students reported mostly positive feelings toward the assignment. Concluded the researchers: “We believe extensive listening can and should be integrated in the EFL curriculum because it improves not only EFL learners’ overall listening skills, but also their overall spoken communication.” Yao and Zuo (2009) found that using Voice of America Special English podcasts in classes improved Chinese students’ English speaking and writing abilities.

Students in Japan also have reported generally liking English-learning podcasts. Lauer (2009) asked 83 university freshmen to listen to a variety of English-learning podcasts, and it was found that an amazing 90% of the 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*.

Despite these positive aspects of podcasts, some evidence indicates that most university students do not listen to English-learning podcasts. Lauer (2008) polled nearly 300 students, finding that only 5% ($N = 15$) of them had ever listened to an English-learning podcast. But this study is about five years old, so conditions may have changed.

It is surprising that so few students seem to listen to English-learning podcasts even though there are many high-quality podcasts available online for no money. Lauer (2011) analyzed 57 podcast sites, and found that the best ones for intermediate-level learners in Japan 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 had been highly-rated in previous studies,

was not included in that analysis because it would have been objectively difficult to do so.) Lauer (2012) also found that the words and expressions which students are exposed to in English-learning podcasts are of the same types and frequencies as the words and expressions found in movies and the English language as a whole.

An important question concerns “how” students listen to podcasts today. The Lauer and Enokida (2010) research found that some students are “active listeners”, doing either shadowing (orally repeating verbatim and almost simultaneously a podcast’s utterances) or note-taking. But this study involved only nine students, so generalizations cannot be made.

The goal of the present study is to determine how much, and in what ways, students utilize English-learning podcasts.

THE PRESENT STUDY

A total of 224 Hiroshima University students in 11 English classes were polled at the start of the fall semester in 2012. Sixty-one percent of the students were majoring in science fields (biology, science, engineering or medicine) while the others represented the humanities (literature, law, education or economics). Most were freshmen, with 14% being sophomores and 5% being juniors.

Of all the students, 21% (N=48) indicated that they had listened to at least one English-learning podcast. These 48 students were given detailed questionnaires, with the condition that if they filled them out and handed them in the following week, they would each receive 100 yen. The survey was written in Japanese, and it can be found in the appendix of this paper.

The 22 students (10 male and 12 female) who filled out the survey had an average TOEIC score of 604 (SD= 72.53, but three students did not fill out this part of the survey). Twenty of the students were freshmen, one was a sophomore, and one was a junior. Sixteen were science majors. Eleven students had never been outside of Japan, five had been abroad for less than one week, four had been abroad one week to one month, and one had been abroad for three months. (One student did not answer this question.)

The 22 students were also asked to rank their own perceived abilities with respect to the skills of speaking, reading, writing, and listening, with “1” being the strongest skill and “4” being the weakest skill. (Two students did not answer this question.) As a group, the students thought they were strongest in reading (average = 1.35 ranking), followed by writing (2.35), listening (2.9) and speaking (3.4).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The main finding was that only 21% of students had ever listened to English-learning podcasts. This is a significant increase compared to the 5% figure from five years before (Lauer, 2008). But this datum also suggests that most high school teachers in Japan today are not requiring or persuading students to listen to podcasts, and most Hiroshima University teachers during the first semester have not convinced students to listen to them either.

When asked which podcasts they have enjoyed listening to the most (Question 1), half of

all the students, 11, noted English News Weekly, and 8 students cited Hiroshima University's English Podcast. Both of these podcasts are produced by Hiroshima University, and they were probably recommended during first semester courses. Besides the two, only five other podcasts were mentioned by the students, each one only one time; NHK English News was the only one cited by name, and the others were referred to vaguely as sports, news, science, and TOEIC podcasts. This indicates that very few students seem to know about or are interested in the large number of English-learning podcasts which are available for free at iTunes store.

Next, students were asked why they like those podcasts (Question 2). Most students cited particular podcast episodes which they liked, such as the "Tsunami football" and "Anti-nuclear power plants" podcasts at English News Weekly, and the "Aliens" and "How to avoid getting fat" episodes at Hiroshima University English Podcast. Also, several students wrote that current events are very interesting, and that news which is read at a slow speed is easy to understand and helpful.

Importantly, students were asked how much time they spend listening to English podcasts each week (Question 3), and the results showed that very few students listen to English podcasts much. One student stated that he listened about two hours per week. But no other student listened more than one hour per week; among this vast majority, the average was only about 30 minutes per week.

Consequently, 77% of the students (N =17) said that their English skills improved only "moderately" due to podcasts. No students said that their English skills improved "a lot." Three students said their skills improved "not much", and two students remarked that they did not know the answer.

Several questions asked about the ways students use the podcasts (Questions 4, 7, 8, and 10). Nineteen students said they listened to the podcasts multiple times, eight students said they sometimes spoke expressions out loud while listening, and eight students said they sometimes took notes while listening. Ten students said they used the written script "only a little," 10 said they used the script "some," and only two students said they used the script "a lot." Sixteen students said they listened to the podcast before reading the script, and five students did it in the reverse order. One student said that she has studied podcasts in the past with a friend, but the other 21 students said they have never studied a podcast together with a friend.

Three questions asked about students' desires regarding the contents of podcasts (Questions 5, 6, and 9). Seventeen students said they like "short" podcasts, while five students said they like "long" ones. Seven students said they did not want much Japanese support in a podcast, 12 said they wanted "some" Japanese support, and only two said they wanted "a lot of" Japanese support. Thirteen students said they liked to have "a slower speed" available in a podcast, while eight students said they only wanted to listen to "natural speed."

The final question (Question 15) asked students to describe the best ways to improve English listening skills. Seven students wrote answers which can be summarized as "just keep listening to anything." Five students recommended shadowing. Five students recommended spending a lot of time speaking English, and then listening skills would naturally improve. There

were various other recommendations; particularly interesting ones were that students should watch English versions of Japanese animations, and that students should begin listening to things at a very slow speed, and then gradually increase to faster speeds.

CONCLUSIONS

The goal of this research was to survey the average university student's attitudes and behaviors concerning English-learning podcasts. It was found that 79% (N = 224) of students at Hiroshima University (most of whom were at the beginning of their second semester) had never listened to such podcasts, and even those who had listened to them had not done so to a significant degree, averaging only about 30 minutes per week.

Yet, students who have listened to podcasts generally say that they are interesting and helpful. In this study, 77% of the surveyed students (N = 17) said that their overall English skills improved "moderately" because of using podcasts. There were especially-favorable attitudes toward podcasts which dealt with current news events, offered Japanese support, and had audio clips with English that was slower than natural speed.

High school and university students should be made aware of the effective and enjoyable podcasts available for free at iTunes Store.

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APPENDIX : The survey

(Note: The actual survey included more space between questions, and used a larger font size.)

ポッドキャスト調査

この調査は、みなさんの勉強の仕方を確認するためのものです。回答に正解はなく、成績にも関係しません。結果も調査目的以外には使用されません。来週の授業までにラウアー先生に提出すれば、調査協力費として100円差し上げます。

1. どんなポッドキャストを聴いていますか。よく聞くポッドキャストの名称なども挙げてください。
2. これまで聞いたポッドキャストの中で一番良いものは何でしたか。また良いと思った理由も書いてください。
3. これまでポッドキャストをどのぐらい聴いていましたか。たとえば何年の間、週に平均何時間くらい？
4. ポッドキャスト・スクリプトはどのぐらい参照しますか。
A. かなり多く B. ある程度 C. ほとんど見ない
5. 比較的短いポッドキャストが好きですか。それとも比較的長いものの方が好きですか。
6. ポッドキャストを利用して英語の勉強をするとき、日本語の助けや解説はどのぐらい欲しいですか
A. かなり多く B. ある程度 C. ほとんどいらない
7. ポッドキャストを聴くとき
 - 覚えたい単語を声に出して言いますか。
 - 重要だと思った表現を書き留めますか。
 - 何回も繰り返して聴きますか。
8. 聴く前に、ポッドキャスト・スクリプトを読みますか。
9. スロースピーチのものが役に立ちますか。それともナチュラルスピードのものだけを聴きたいですか。
10. 友達と一緒にポッドキャストを聞いて勉強することがありますか。
11. ポッドキャストの利用は、英語能力の向上に役立ちましたか。
A. かなり多く B. ある程度 C. ほとんど役だっていない
12. 今までに得た TOEIC スコアの最高値は何点ですか。
13. あなたの英語能力の4つの技能（話す、読む、書く、聴く）について、得意な方から順にどの程度かを書いてください。
14. 海外へは行ったことがありますか。ある場合は、具体的に、どこに、どれくらい、どんな目的で行ったかを書いてください。
15. 英語のリスニング能力を向上するために、一番良いやり方は何だと思いますか。

要 約

学生の英語学習ポッドキャストの活用実態調査

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広島大学で学ぶ学生224人を対象に、英語学習ポッドキャストの活用実態についての調査を行った。調査に参加した学生のほとんどが一年生であり、男女の比率はほぼ半分ずつで、専攻は多岐にわたる。

調査結果によると、わずか21%（48人）しか英語学習ポッドキャストを聴いたことがないことが分かった。さらに、これらのポッドキャスト活用経験者の内、22人の学生がより詳細な情報提供をアンケートで回答した。残念ながら、彼らのほとんどがあまり積極的な活用態度を持っておらず、一週間で平均30分程度しか英語学習ポッドキャストを聴いていない。

しかしながら、これらの活用経験者のほとんどが英語学習ポッドキャスト（番組）に対して良い印象を有していることも分かった。例えば、多くの学生が時事問題を扱ったポッドキャスト番組が好きであり、ゆっくりとした発話スピードがあると学習に役に立つと回答した。また、多くの学生がポッドキャストを聴く時、ノートテーキングやシャドーイングなどのような、主体的なリスニング練習を行っているようだ。さらに、80%の活用経験者はポッドキャストのおかげで、英語能力がある程度で上達したと報告している。

このような調査結果を踏まえると、英語教師、とりわけ高校教師は、生徒に英語学習ポッドキャストの効用利益についてもっときちんと教えるべきだと言える。さらに、ポッドキャスト作成者は学生のニーズと好みに一致しているポッドキャスト番組を作るべきだと考える。