

Bringing Pronunciation Practice into English Podcasts: Report on a Visit to a Podcast Producer

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These days most English-learning podcasts are based on lively discussions or dialogs which try to make studying the language fun (Lauer, 2011). However, it is clear that some students need – and indeed want – specific pronunciation instruction, because such instruction is easy to understand, does not waste time with frivolous talk, and high-quality pronunciation is demanded in professional settings around the world today. Also, pronunciation can indeed be improved when there is quality instruction (see Gilakjani, 2012, for a review of the literature).

The present short report is based on a recent visit to the headquarters of one of the leading pronunciation podcast producers in the world, Seattle Learning Academy, located on the west coast of the United States. This small language school, since 2008, has produced about 200 podcasts called American English Pronunciation Podcast. They are available free of charge online (<http://pronuncian.com/Podcast/>) or at iTunes store.

According to Mandy Egle, the main producer of the podcast, there have been about 7.5 million downloads of the pronunciation podcasts during the first five years. Especially, requests for good English pronunciation instruction come from non-native English speaking professionals who have to give effective oral presentations in the workplace. People also need good pronunciation skills when using Skype and the phone, selling products, and speaking English with native English-speaking coworkers in the office. Says Egle, “When it comes to communication, it’s not just what you say, but how you say it.”

For learners of English in Japan, Egle especially recommends that students concentrate on the following five important topics:

1) The contrast between /l/ and /r/: During a podcast lesson, students first learn about the pronunciations of the two letters separately. Then, they master some words which have both sounds in them, such as *girl*, *world*, *early*, and *really*. Finally, they memorize a model sentence: *I would really like a little red wagon like Laura’s*. (For more details on this, see podcast #5 at the site),

2) The contrast between long vowels and short vowels, such as the long e sound in *keep* /i/ and the short i /ɪ/ sound in *sit* (see podcast #98),

3) Unstressed syllables in words such as *banana*, and heteronyms like con’duct vs. ‘conduct (see podcast #14),

4) The pronunciation of the th sounds, /ð/ and /θ/, as in words such as *thin* and *though* (see podcast #9), and

5) The contrast between the long o, the short o, and the aw sound in words such as *coat*,

cot, and *caught* /oo,ɑ,ɔ/ (see podcast #7).

Unfortunately, the podcasts have no Japanese support, which makes them challenging for low-level learners of English in Japan. However, since full transcripts of the podcasts are available online for free, they can be studied well. The company, which makes its money from the sale of pronunciation textbooks and online tutoring, is hoping to add Japanese support to the podcasts in the future.

At Hiroshima University's English Podcast, almost nothing has been done systematically with pronunciation. In the fall of 2012 explicit grammar instructions were begun, teaching grammatical articles *the/a*, conditional *if*, and indirect speech. The next step in the near future will be to do more with pronunciation. American English Pronunciation Podcast provides a good model for producing pronunciation podcasts.

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要 約

英語学習ポッドキャストにおける発音練習の導入

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