Developing English Podcasts to Help Lower-level Students

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During the last 15 years, a lot of podcasts have been made to help students improve their English skills. These sound and video files, mostly available free of charge at iTunes Store, can be downloaded into smart phones and computers, where they can be listened to at any time and any place. Unfortunately, most of the podcasts are aimed at intermediate- and higher-level English learners.

This paper describes a new set of podcast materials designed at Hiroshima University for lower-level English students. The most interesting characteristic of the materials is that they utilize "shadowing." Shadowing is a technique for learning English in which students repeat utterances immediately after they hear them. The effectiveness and popularity of shadowing drills in Japan is described in this paper. Also, a survey was conducted to determine which type of podcasts university freshmen like. It was found that most freshmen preferred simpler podcast materials, containing Japanese support and shadowing exercises.

THE STATE OF ENGLISH-LEARNING PODCASTS

Listening to podcasts seems to be a very effective way to improve English skills. Theoretically, Rosell-Aguilar (2007) claims that podcast materials conform well to communicative approaches (interacting with the real world), behaviourist notions (listening and repeating), and lifelong learning theories (studying outside the classroom). He also says that podcasts are compatible with chunking theory (Lewis, 2000) in that individual podcasts are associated with particular themes (such as the environment, or Seattle, or music), so students can effectively group words together. Thus, podcasts are, theoretically, motivating and powerful tools for learning English as a foreign language because they provide access to a large amount of authentic materials, and because students have control over the materials they listen to.

Some applied linguistics studies have also found podcasts to be motivating and effective. In Japan, Lauer and Enokida (2010) conducted a longitudinal study with nine Japanese university students over a five-month period. The students, as a group, significantly improved their dictation scores ($p<.05$). 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 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 students in Spain 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 who listen to English podcasts have reported that they are worthwhile and enjoyable experiences (Lauer, 2009, 2013). For example, in the first study 90% of university students rated the English podcasts that they listened to as being either *good* or *very good*. However, the 2013 study 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.

The best podcasts for intermediate-level learners in Japan, according to Lauer (2011), include 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. (Note: Hiroshima University's podcasts, which have been highly rated in previous studies, were not included in this analysis, because it would have been difficult to do so objectively.)

Importantly for the current research, Lauer (2011) found that very few high-quality podcasts exist for lower-level learners of English in Japan. The best two were said to be: 1) Machigai Podcast—Aimed at high school students, an American man and a Japanese woman talk about tricky grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation. The podcasts are humorous and contain good Japanese support, but there are almost no written scripts on the homepage; and 2) CNN English Express—These podcasts appeal to all ages, come out three times per week, and are made of short two- or three-minute files. But the files may be too short, lacking context. Also, some teachers and researchers might say they contain too much Japanese. No podcasts were found to explicitly encourage shadowing, and none have pauses between phrases so that students can immediately vocalize what is heard.

Low-level English learners have particular needs (Alberding, 2003). First, they need to be exposed to interesting materials which are just above their current abilities. Also, exposure to key vocabulary just before the listening activity reduces stress. Importantly, they need to be taught effective listening strategies, such as listening for gist. They need to understand English audio linguistic phenomena, such as liaison, elision, assimilation, and weak forms. And, the materials should be brief, to avoid "information overload." Multiple studies have found that lower-level learners prefer to have a lot of support in their native language (Carson, 2014).

THE EFFECTIVENESS OF SHADOWING

Shadowing is often thought to be an effective way to improve English listening skills (Lambert, 1992). In Japan, Tamai (1992, 1997) and Kadota (2007) have argued that, theoretically, shadowing is effective because it is an active and highly cognitive activity—students are not just passively listening. They say that shadowing activates bottom-up processing; if students can understand the basic words, they can later understand sentence and textual meanings.

Actually, there are several types of shadowing (Kurata, 2007). One of the most difficult is "full shadowing," in which listeners immediately repeat out loud utterances from continuous speech which they are hearing. Simultaneous translators often use full shadowing in training. An easier version for students is called "slash shadowing," in which the speaker intentionally puts in pauses between phrases so that the

student can have a few seconds to recognize the expression and say it in an audible voice. Other types of shadowing include "silent shadowing," in which students repeat only in their minds at the sub-vocalization level, and "part shadowing plus adding a comment or question"; the latter is like slash shadowing, but adds an extra mental component.

Several English applied linguistics studies have found shadowing to be beneficial. For example, both Suzuki (2007) and Hamada (2011) found that shadowing significantly improved high school students' English listening skills. Onaha (2004) found that a combination of shadowing and dictation exercises improved the English listening abilities of university students. Tamai (1992, 2005), in multiple longitudinal studies involving university students, found that shadowing was an even more effective technique than dictation. He found that shadowing was especially beneficial for lower-level learners. Abroad, for example, Zakeri (2014) found that shadowing significantly improved the English speaking fluency abilities of college students in Iran.

Shadowing has also been shown to be beneficial when learning other languages. Mochizuki (2006) found that 49 out of 50 college students from various countries who were studying Japanese thought that shadowing was effective. Toda and Liu (2007) found that students in Korea also liked using shadowing when studying Japanese. Arguelles (2010), a teacher based in Singapore, strongly states on his homepage that he has learned many languages by utilizing shadowing.

But of course, shadowing has negative points, too. Especially, Shiki et al. (2010) claim that a lot of students get tired of shadowing after the novelty wears off. Kadota (2007) says that shadowing materials which contain more than two or three unknown words per 100 words of speech can be very frustrating for students.

DEVELOPING PODCASTS FOR LOW-LEVEL ENGLISH LEARNERS

In the spring of 2014, Hiroshima University spawned a new series of podcasts for low-level English learners entitled アメリカ探検の旅 (Adventure in America). The main producers are this researcher, who is in charge of the contents, and Kazumichi Enokida, who is in charge of audio editing, sound effects, and posting the podcasts. In order to give students an ample archive, 21 of these podcasts came out in 2014, and currently one per month is posted. The final episode (Number 40) is scheduled to appear in late 2016, but a new, similar series might be made immediately after that.

The アメリカ探検の旅 podcasts are each six to ten minutes long, and they center around two young adults (a Japanese man, Jun, and an American woman, Lydia) who live and travel in the United States for a few months. The two hosts of the podcasts are a bilingual Japanese woman (a graduate student) and an American man (this researcher) who speaks only English during the podcasts. Each podcast involves a short dialog between Jun and Lydia; third speakers, such as waiters or flight attendants, only rarely appear. After an explanation of the topic and key vocabulary, a dialog is read twice by native speakers of English, first utilizing "slash shadowing," and then at slightly-slower-than natural speed. To listen to the podcasts, go to: http://pod.flare.hiroshima-u.ac.jp/cms/index.php?catid=22&blogid=1 To see a typical dialog, refer to the appendix of this paper.

Linguistically, the first 16 podcasts were analyzed. The dialogs each had an average of 125 words, 20.6 sentences, 6.4 words per sentence, and 1.3 syllables per word. (Standard Deviation values are not reported

here, but there was not much deviation.) The average dialog had a Flesh-Kincaid Grade Level of 1.8; this means a native speaker at the end of elementary school first grade could probably read and understand the text.

All of the words in the 16 podcasts, except for five words, appear on the JACET 8,000 List (Aizawa et al., 2007); this list reflects "(word) frequency and educational significance" (Uemura and Ishikawa, 2004). The five words not on the list are *espionage*, *cheese curds*, *lame*, *bistro-style*, and *wakeboarding*. All of the other words are listed in the top 5,000 most frequent-important words, except for the following, which fall between 5,000 and 8,000: *blah-blah-blah*, *ear plugs*, *tempo*, *compliment*, *patriotic*, *to deduct*, and *aquarium*. The following compound expressions might be difficult for students, but they are explained by the hosts on the program: *to try out for*, *alligator-on-a-stick, to name (something) after (something)*, and *to live on* (*amount of money*). (Proper names were not included in this analysis.) In summary, efforts have been made by the producers of the podcasts to use mostly high-frequency expressions.

The アメリカ探検の旅 podcasts complement a range of podcasts produced at Hiroshima University. For details on those podcasts, see the next section.

SURVEY ABOUT STUDENT PODCAST PREFERENCES

As a part of podcast-listening homework, 93 first-year Hiroshima University students were asked to listen to five different types of podcasts produced at the school, each podcast for at least three minutes. The students were then asked to rank their three favorite podcasts.

The five podcasts were: A) English News Weekly: This is a 15-20 min higher-level English program because it is delivered exclusively in English. But news and culture topics are read at a slow speed, and there are online scripts and comprehension exercises accompanying the podcasts, so even intermediate-level learners should be able to benefit from it. B) やさしい英語会話: This is a 15-20 min intermediate-level program in which two hosts explain the words and contents of a 2-3 minute dialog. One host is bilingual and gives a lot of Japanese support, while the other host speaks only English. There is also some online support in scripts and bilingual vocabulary lists attached to the site, explaining key expressions in the dialogs. Near the beginning of the podcast, the dialog is read by two native speakers at very slow speed; then, near the end of the podcast, it is read at natural speed. C) アメリカ探検の旅: This is the 5-10 min podcast for low-level learners. For details, see the previous section of this paper. D) ドラマで英語を学ぼう: This is a 15-20 min podcast for higher-level learners, because most of the audio and written materials are in English, with only a small amount of Japanese. The drama materials range from easy adaptations of Shakespeare works, to adventure stories written by foreign college students. E) 異文化ディスカッション: This is also a 15-20 min higher-level podcast, in which a native English-speaking host interviews two foreign students about cultural topics. The audio materials are almost entirely in English, but written vocabulary lists have some Japanese support in them.

In this study, the teacher/researcher never encouraged students to listen to one type of podcast over the others. But importantly, one factor which might have influenced students was that the course teacher's voice (this researcher) could be heard in podcasts B through E above, while a different teacher (possibly unknown to the students) was the producer of English News Weekly. Thus, to slightly make up for this, English News Weekly was listed first on the list.

The students came from five different classes. Sixteen of the students in one class majored in Biology (average TOEIC score = 550 (SD = 131)), 25 students in another class majored in Medicine (TOEIC = 615 (SD = 92)), and 34 students from two classes majored in Education (one class TOEIC = 369 (SD = 88), the other class TOEIC = 522 (SD = 65)). All of those students were in first-year "English Conversation" courses. The fifth group came from a course called 上級英語 (Advanced English), a four-skills general English course, and these 18 students were higher-level (average TOEIC was unknown, but it was thought to be between 600 and 750). Overall, 53 students were women, and 40 were men.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

To analyze the survey data, each student's favorite podcast was given 3 points, the second favorite was given 2 points, and the third favorite received one point. (A couple of students ranked only their single favorite, and a couple of students had ties for first and ties for second; in the latter case, the two "seconds" were regarded as "thirds".) The overall results are listed in the Table.

TABLE. Hiroshima University Freshmen Preferences for Podcasts

Name of Podcast	Popularity Points
1）やさしい英語会話（Easy English Conversation）	173
2）アメリカ探検の旅（Adventure in America）	146
3）ドラマで英語を学ぼう（Using Drama to Learn English）	90
4）異文化ディスカッション（Cross-culture Discussion）	83
5）English News Weekly	65

The first result to note is that the relatively easy podcasts finished high on the list—in positions one and two—while the more difficult podcasts were less popular. Specifically, やさしい英語会話 was ranked Number 1 by 34 students, and it was in the top three of 79 of the 93 students. Meanwhile, アメリカ探検の旅 received 25 first-place votes, and was ranked in the top three by 65 students.

Unfortunately, the exact reasons for their preferences were not investigated in this study, and only speculations can be made. Concerning やさしい英語会話, perhaps students liked it because one of the hosts, a female, was quite bilingual, so she could give Japanese support. Or, maybe the students liked the dialogs, which are written by students (mostly foreign ones) and often have humorous twists. Or, maybe they liked the fact that the dialogs were first read at a very slow speed, and then at a natural speed.

Regarding アメリカ探検の旅, the students might have liked it because, as explained in the previous section, the dialogs include shadowing practice. Or, perhaps they liked it because the dialogs are very short and vocabulary is easy. Or, maybe they liked it because there was solid Japanese support, and the dialogs revolve around a continuous, relatively interesting theme—travelling in the United States.

Another important finding was that ALL of the podcasts received a lot of points. For example, even concerning fifth-ranked English News Weekly, 35 of the 93 students—over-one third of all students-- ranked it in their top three. And nine students ranked English News Weekly as their favorite. No relation between English ability and choosing English News Weekly could be detected; those first-place rankings were basically spread among four different classes.

A surprising result was that a lot of students in the two highest-level courses (the 上級英語 and Medical classes) also ranked the easiest podcasts highly. Specifically, in the first class, six of the 18 students (one-third of all students) ranked アメリカ探検の旅 as their favorite, and four students ranked やさしい英語会話 as their favorite. In the Medical class, nine of the 25 students (over one-third of all students) ranked やさしい英語会話 as their favorite, and seven students ranked アメリカ探検の旅 as the best. Since these students' TOEIC scores were high, and since relatively challenging materials were being used in class, it had been thought that more of these students would have preferred higher-level podcasts.

CONCLUSION

This study found that most surveyed college freshmen highly ranked やさしい英語会話 and アメリカ探検の旅, which are the two easiest-to-understand podcasts. The former podcast features a lot of Japanese audio support, and a key feature of the latter podcast is slash shadowing.

In the future, research should investigate the effectiveness of shadowing in podcasts, and students' preferences for other types of podcasts available on Internet. Do podcasts containing shadowing practice actually improve English abilities? Do students actually enjoy doing shadowing? These questions need to be investigated soon.

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APPENDIX
A typical アメリカ探検の旅 podcast dialog (Number 3)

場面: シアトル航空の税関にいます。ラディアは"アメリカ市民"のカウンターへ行きました。ジュンは"外国人観光客"の列へ。

W: Hi. Welcome to the US. Can I see your passport?

M: Oh, my passport?… Hmm… where is it? Oh, here it is!

W: Thank you. So... Mr. Yamada, what will you be doing in the US?

M: Um, I'm a tourist, for 8 weeks.

W: Wow, 8 weeks. Sounds great… Oh, on your form, you didn't fill this out.

M: Oh, let me see: "Have you ever been involved in espionage? Yes or No." Hmm… Espionage? What does that mean?

W: Um… are you a spy?

M: A spy? Yes or no? What kind of question is that? If I am a spy, am I going to check "yes"?

W: Mr. Yamada. Are you going to give us a hard time? Please step this way.

M: Oh no!

要　約

英語初級レベル学習者のためのポッドキャスト開発

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　学生の英語能力向上を図るため，この約 15 年間で多くのポッドキャストが作成された。オーディオとビデオファイルは，通常無料でダウンロードが可能であり，学習者はいつでもどこでも使用することができる。しかし，ほとんどの英語学習用ポッドキャストは中級と上級の視聴者を対象としている。

　本研究は，まず広島大学で最近作成された英語初級レベル学習者用ポッドキャストを紹介する。このポッドキャストの特徴は，シャドーイングを導入していることである。シャドーイングとは，学習者に英語を聴かせ，学習者が直ぐに復唱する学習法のことである。本論文では，これまでのシャドーイングの効果に関する研究をまとめた。また，広島大学が制作・配信している 5 種類のポッドキャストの人気度に関して，大学一年生を対象とした調査を行った。その結果，簡単で，日本語による多くの解説があるシャドーイングを取り入れたポッドキャストがより好まれることが明らかとなった。