

# Podcast Power: Hiroshima University's New English Listening Materials

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This paper explains about the contents and theoretical basis behind Hiroshima University's new English-learning podcasts. The podcasts are produced for two levels—lower-intermediate and upper-intermediate—and one podcast per week has been made available to the public for no charge since August 2008. In early 2009, the podcasts were ranked the 89<sup>th</sup> most popular podcast at iTunes Store. To use the podcasts, simply do a search for “Hiroshima University Podcast” at iTunes Store, or go to this homepage: <http://pod.flare.hiroshima-u.ac.jp/cms/>

This paper also surveys the opinions of 83 Japanese university freshmen who listened to a variety of English-learning podcasts which are available online. According to the questionnaire, which was conducted in Japanese, 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 *very good*, and 54% of all students rated them *good*. Hiroshima University podcasts received higher than average marks. The students also wrote comments, in Japanese, about how the podcasts can be improved.

## BACKGROUND

Podcasts are a new and exciting way for students to improve their English listening skills. For usually no money, students can download interesting and educational programs from the Internet into personal computers and mobile devices such as i-Pods. The audio and/or visual programs are automatically delivered to subscribers, often on a weekly or even on a daily basis. Learners can utilize those materials whenever they want, wherever they want, and as often as they want—again, virtually for no money.

High-quality podcasts need to be pedagogically sound and based on applied linguistic findings. For example, Krashen's (1985) Input Hypothesis claims that people learn a second language when they hear/read utterances which are slightly ahead of their current states of linguistic knowledge. Hinkel (2006), in a review of the listening literature, states that audio materials which are slower-than-natural speed are undoubtedly beneficial for most learners. Findings show that the materials should have pre-listening introductions or exercises to help students, not only with vocabulary and pronunciation, but also with cultural schema. Listen-and-do tasks, such as note-taking and speaking, are also helpful. Similarly, Chang and Read (2006) found that utilizing pre-listening materials and repeatedly listening to audio clips are the two activities most closely associated with successful listening comprehension.

Theoretically, according to Rosell-Aguilar (2007), podcast materials seem to conform well to communicative approaches (interacting with the real world), behaviourist notions (listening and repeating), and lifelong learning theories. For instance, Naismith et al. (2005) claim that podcasts are effective because they mostly are studied outside of class, and so are embedded in real life. Podcasts are also compatible with chunking theory in that individual podcasts are associated with particular themes (such as the environment, or Seattle, or music) and students can link the vocabulary taught in that podcast to that particular theme (Ally, 2004). In summary, podcasts are 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. These factors are very motivating.

Podcasts seem to be especially effective materials for students who like to study English at their own pace. Sloan (2005) stated that podcasts are not only good for slow learners, but also for highly-motivated learners who want extra content. Supporting this notion, Gromik (2008) carried out a longitudinal study in Japan, repeatedly interviewing two advanced learners who used video podcasts. He concluded that it was “beneficial” for students to have such self-access materials.

One possible theoretical weakness of podcasts is that they lack “social interaction” which has been thought to be important in language acquisition (Dalgarno, 2001). However, Ellis (1999) contends that while interaction is helpful, it is not a necessary condition, and students can learn through non-social interactions too. Interestingly, podcasts are sometimes accompanied by blogs, where users can give feedback and interact with the podcast creators and fellow users.

Which are better: audio or visual podcasts? Clark and Walsh (2006) state that both have their advantages. While video’s strong points are fairly obvious and so will not be explained here, audio podcasts definitely have appeal too. Audio podcasts are especially good because they free the eyes and hands for other purposes. Also, audio podcasts are more socially acceptable while commuting. Furthermore, for a lot of people, listening is often a more relaxing and natural way of learning. (Children learn a first language by listening, not by reading.) Also, listening through earphones gives a comfortable feeling of isolation, and so may increase concentration. Last but not least, audio media players are cheaper than visual ones, so are more widespread.

In an important study, Lauer (2008) investigated the podcasting habits and desires of 298 Japanese university students, and also evaluated 77 English-learning podcasts. He found that only 10% of the students had ever listened to podcasts of any type. Of the students who had listened to them, about half said that they sometimes had listened to English-learning podcasts. The study found that two out of three students had digital audio players or music-enabled cellular phones which were capable of downloading podcasts.

Lauer determined that some of the best podcasts for intermediate-level Japanese learners of English were: Weblish: メディア英会話, The Daily English Show, 英会話 eChat 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. The video podcasts received some of the highest scores in the study. For a list of the top-rated sites, see: [http://home.hiroshima-u.ac.jp/flare/English/Using\\_Podcasts.html](http://home.hiroshima-u.ac.jp/flare/English/Using_Podcasts.html)

## THE NATURE OF HIROSHIMA UNIVERSITY'S PODCASTS

Hiroshima University's podcasts are designed for Japanese learners of English, aged 15 and above. Thus, it is assumed that students have already studied some English—at least have finished junior high school—and so have knowledge of basic English vocabulary and grammar.

Free of charge, every week the 15-30 minute audio podcasts can be automatically downloaded into computers and easy-to-carry iPods, MP3 players, and some cell phones. Hiroshima University's podcast homepage includes downloadable dialog scripts. Also, there are interest-grabbing podcast synopses, written in Japanese, and photos. The podcasts are technically produced by Kazumichi Enokida, using Garageband software. (For technical details, see Enokida's paper in this journal.) The contents of the podcasts are directed by Joe Lauer. The average podcast takes a total of about eight hours to produce.

As mentioned earlier, there are two levels which can be labeled low-intermediate and upper-intermediate. The low-intermediate podcasts, normally appearing on the second, third and fourth Tuesdays of each month, are called やさしい英語会話 (Easy English Conversation), and they contain a lot of Japanese audio support. The "hosts" of the program are a native-English-speaking man and a native-Japanese-speaking woman. During the first year, the man has been "Joe", the writer of this paper, who has over 20 years of experience teaching in universities in Japan; the woman has been "Juri", a third-year college student who has excellent English skills, having passed the 1<sup>st</sup> (top) level of the Eiken Test.

The lower-intermediate level podcasts are based upon 2-minute dialogs dealing with subjects thought to be of interest to Japanese university students. Whenever the hosts speak, there is relaxing jazz music in the background. The hosts begin with a 2-3 minute introduction of the topic, often explaining some key pre-listening vocabulary. Then the dialog is read by two people (not the hosts) at a slower-than-natural and easy-to-understand speed, with no background noises. Next, Juri and Joe, for 10-15 minutes, explain key vocabulary and provide various example sentences. Then, the dialog is read by the two non-hosts again at natural (fast) speed, with real-life background sound effects or interesting background music. Finally, Juri and Joe have a concluding talk about some cultural aspect related to the dialog, or they summarize key vocabulary in the dialog.

The upper-intermediate podcasts are almost exclusively in English, and they come in two types. The first, which is made available on the first Tuesday of each month, is a series of interviews about foreign cultures, places, and topics of interest to university students. Entitled 異文化ディスカッション (Cross-culture Discussion), Joe interviews two foreign students or teachers. The second type of material for upper-intermediate learners is a drama entitled *The Weirdest Honeymoon Ever*. It is a comedy play written by a professional American playwright

who gave Hiroshima University permission to use the play. Each of the five parts of the play include a 15-minute explanation of key vocabulary, followed by a 6-minute enactment of that portion of the play. The play was performed by foreign students in a recording studio at the school. These upper-intermediate materials, while conducted almost entirely in English, are appropriate second-language learning materials because the conversation speeds are slightly slower than natural native-speaker speeds, and because difficult vocabulary is either avoided or is explained.

Other aspects of the podcasts which make them unique are that:

- The dialogs are mostly written by university students—both foreigners and Japanese—so they appeal to the interests of young people. They are edited by Lauer.
- The dialogs are read by people from various countries, so students can practice listening to numerous accents—a skill which is now demanded on the TOEIC. During the first six months of the project, people from the following countries helped with the recordings: China, Malaysia, India, the United States, Great Britain, Russia, Australia, and Singapore.
- Two key expressions kept in mind at all stages of writing the dialogs and producing the podcasts are: to be fun (including humor), and to be pedagogically sound and educational.

The podcasts are financially supported by a grant from the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science & Technology (#199520491). Thus, it is guaranteed that the podcasts will continue through early March 2010. The total amount of the grant is ¥1,300,000. Almost all of the money is used for buying equipment, or for paying part-time students. Since there will be approximately 85 podcasts made available to the public during the period of the grant; this breaks down to about ¥15,000 per podcast.

During the first four months of weekly publication, in late 2008, it is believed that the podcasts were accessed by almost 1,000 people. But since the podcasts were only available on iTunes during the final month of that period, it is believed that the number of listeners has greatly increased during 2009.

## THE STUDY

In December of 2008, a total of 83 students in three freshmen university English classes each listened to at least one podcast of their choosing as homework. The three classes, each composed of approximately half males and half females, covered a wide range of listening abilities. One class could be called “lower level”; these students were not very motivated to learn English, and came from the Faculty of Engineering. A second class could be called “intermediate level”; its students came from the Faculty of Education. The final class was definitely high level, coming from a wide range of faculties. The first two courses were entitled “Listening”, were compulsory, and were composed of about 45 students each. The high-level course was entitled “Advanced English”; it was a four-skills elective course composed of about 25 students.

The students were each given a questionnaire and a link to a homepage which had “The Top 40 Podcasts”. Hiroshima University’s podcasts were not mentioned in the Top 40, but they were introduced on the homepage. As a result, students listened to a wide range of podcasts, but most of them chose Hiroshima University Podcasts. The most listened-to individual program was “Showing Someone Around Hiroshima”, which attracted 25 students. For a list of the recommended sites, see this homepage address: [http://home.hiroshima-u.ac.jp/flare/English/Using\\_Podcasts.html](http://home.hiroshima-u.ac.jp/flare/English/Using_Podcasts.html)

On the one-page survey, students were asked the following questions: 1) Which podcast did you listen to? 2) Overall, how would you evaluate the podcast: Very good? Good? So-so? Or Bad? 3) What were some good points of the podcast? 4) What were some bad points of the podcast? (Cite at least three points.) And, 5) Please write about your overall impressions of the podcast. (Especially, mention ways in which the podcast could be improved.)

Thus, it was a very open-ended questionnaire. It was conducted entirely in Japanese. (See the Appendix of this paper.)

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As seen in Table 1, students had overwhelmingly positive reactions to the podcasts. For all podcasts, an amazing 90% of students rated them either *very good* or *good*. Specifically, 36% of all students rated them *very good*, and 54% of all students rated them *good*.

Hiroshima University podcasts rated slightly better than all other podcasts. In particular, 38% of students rated the school’s podcasts as *very good*, while 55% of students rated them as *good*. Of all non-university podcasts, 18% of students rated them *very good*, and 45% rated them *good*. The non-university podcasts were rated as follows. Two students gave the following podcasts *very good* marks: ポッド de モット英会話 and ECC 英会話 Podcasting. Five students gave these podcasts *good* ratings: 毎日ちょこっとリスニング特訓, ESL and Archie Comics, BBC Learning English, VOA Special English, and 毎日新聞ポッドキャスト. Two students rated 英語脳の芽が育つ as so-so, and the following podcasts each received one rating

TABLE 1. Number of Students Choosing Particular Evaluations

Type of Podcast (HU = Hiroshima University)	Evaluation (Number of Students)			
	Very Good	Good	So-so	Bad
HU's やさしい英語会話	24	39	2	0
HU's 異文化ディスカッション	5	2	1	0
HU's Weirdest Honeymoon	1	2	2	0
Podcasts Other Than HU	2	5	4	0

Note: Numbers slightly exceed the total number of students, because 11 students listened to more than one podcast. Among those 11 students, the average number of podcasts was 2.36, and the maximum was four. If a student listened to multiple podcasts within one type, then that student’s evaluation was counted only once. If a student listened to podcasts of different types, then that student had multiple evaluations.

of so-so: The Daily English Show and ユーキャンのポッドキャスト.

Of course, the above findings have serious limitations. First, the number of students listening to non-university podcasts was quite limited: only 11. Second and probably more importantly, each student was required to listen to a podcast as homework, and for university podcasts the host was the teacher himself. Thus, students might have wanted to give a good evaluation in order to receive a better homework grade (although in actuality, evaluation scores had no relation to grades).

Of possibly more interest were the comments which the students wrote about the podcasts. As was hoped when the survey was designed—by asking each student to make at least three negative comments—the students made a lot of suggestions on how Hiroshima University's English Podcast can be improved. They also made a lot of positive compliments. See Table 2.

The negative comments especially deserve discussion here. First, almost one-fourth of

TABLE 2. Open-ended Comments about Hiroshima University's English Podcasts, Listed in Decreasing Order of Frequency. (Numbers in parentheses are the numbers of students who made the comments. Comments made by fewer than three students are not listed here.)

Good Points	Bad Points
• Podcasts have Japanese support (23)	• Podcasts are too long (20)
• Topics are interesting (19)	• They are too difficult (16)
• Students can learn culture as well as language (18)	• Podcasts use too much Japanese (9)
• They are easy to understand (13)	• Dialogs need more excitement (8)
• Dialogs are slow-speed (10)	• Podcasts are hard to find (8)
• Podcasts are made for Hiroshima students (10)	• Dialogs are too long (7)
• Scripts are on line (9)	• Videos or photos are needed (7)
• Hosts are talented (6)	• Dialogs are too fast. (6)
• Students can learn spoken expressions (6)	• Scripts should be in Japanese (6)
• Students can use podcasts anywhere and anytime (5)	• Slow-speed dialogs are not interesting or needed (4)
• Explanations are detailed (5)	• No background music during dialogs would be better (4)
• Dialogs are natural speed (4)	• <i>Honeymoon</i> podcasts contain a little audio static noise (3)
• Words are reviewed at the end of a podcast (3)	• Ibunka talks need more Japanese support or scripts (3)
• There are two levels (3)	• Audio scroll bar is too short (3)

the population (20 students) thought the podcasts were too long (although two students thought they were too short). Some of these students suggested that the 20-30 minute lengths be shortened to about 15 minutes. Because of this survey, the podcast producers have already begun reducing the lengths of podcasts by about 15%. Second, eight students said that the dialogs lacked excitement, or were read in a monotone way. Thus, in recent weeks the producers of the podcasts are trying to improve this point. Third, eight students said that the podcasts are relatively hard to find. Helpfully, two of these students recommended that the podcast link be put onto Hiroshima University's Top Homepage.

A few individual students had some unique comments. For example, two students said that the hosts need to put more humor into the talks. Two students recommended that the scripts have the key words highlighted. Two students recommended that the site have vocabulary lists. On a positive point, one student said that the podcasts were similar in quality to NHK's 英語でしゃべらナイト.

Finally, as mentioned above, 11 of the students listened to podcasts which are not connected with Hiroshima University, and, interestingly, their comments were similar to those who listened to the school's podcasts. For example, four of the eleven students thought those podcasts were too long. Also, two students said those podcasts were too hard, and two students criticized the sound quality. But those podcasts also received praise. For example, three students said the wide variety of podcasts could help meet individual student needs.

## CONCLUSIONS

Overall, 36% of all students rated podcasts as being *very good*, with 54% of the remaining students rating them as *good*. Only 10% of students rated them as *so-so*, and, surprisingly, none rated them as *bad*. This 36% statistic, in particular, is quite encouraging, because it means that one-third of all students were very excited about the podcasts. If one-third of all students are very excited about podcasts, this is a good thing because probably one-third of all students are not very excited about learning English in general.

On the negative side, it can be argued that almost two-thirds of students did not give the podcasts a *very good* rating. This means that two-thirds of the students were not extremely excited about the podcasts, so those students might not continue listening to them. Our goal at Hiroshima University, of course, is to get all students very excited about listening to podcasts, because then their English abilities would almost surely improve.

As was hoped when the surveys were designed, the students made a lot of suggestions on how Hiroshima University's English Podcast can be improved. For example, a relatively large number of students said that each individual podcast was too long. Also, a number of students wanted more Japanese support included with the online scripts. But the number of positive comments was overwhelming, too.

In the future, Hiroshima University should strongly consider setting up a blog, where users can give feedback in a social forum; this, theoretically, would make learning even more effective. Hiroshima University will also consider producing video podcasts, or at least implementing

“enhanced podcasts”, which show a number of images to support the audio content. We might consider recording teachers lectures or putting student-produced podcasts online.

Finally, it must be determined how long to continue Hiroshima University’s podcasts. As of this publication, probably over 1,000 different people have listened to at least one of the podcasts. The podcasts are relatively inexpensive to produce. But the podcasts also require some of the time of the two full-time English teachers who produce them. And, it is not clear how many people have found it worthwhile to listen to multiple podcasts.

Most of all, it is not clear how much students improve their English skills by listening to the podcasts. This is an empirical question which will be investigated during 2009.

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## APPENDIX

Note: The actual survey had larger print and ample space between questions.

名前：

**リスニング宿題**：ポッドキャストとは、インターネットを利用して、ウェブ上や iPod などのデジタルプレーヤで音声を聞ける番組です。下記のページの英語学習ポッドキャストから、好きな番組を一つ選び、よく聴いてください。(過去に配信されたものでもかまいません。) 聴いた番組の印象や意見について、詳しく書いてください。

[http://home.hiroshima-u.ac.jp/flare/English/Using\\_Podcasts.html](http://home.hiroshima-u.ac.jp/flare/English/Using_Podcasts.html)

- (1) どのポッドキャストを聴きましたか。(ポッドキャストの名前)
- (2) 大体の評価はどうですか。(該当するものに0をつけてください)  
とても良い — 良い — まあまあ — 面白くない
- (3) 聴いた番組の中で、よかった点や面白かった点を書いてください。
- (4) 聴いた番組の中で、よくなかった点を書いてください。(3点以上をとりあげてください。)
- (5) このポッドキャスト全般についての意見を書いてください。  
(印象や改善すべき点など、どのようなことでもかまいません)

## 要 約

### ポッドキャスト・パワー —— 広島大学の新しい英語学習用リスニング・コンテンツ ——

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本論文では広島大学で開発された新しい英語リスニング用ポッドキャスト教材のコンテンツとその理論的な背景について解説する。この教材には、中級の下と中級の上の2つのレベルがあるが、1週間につき一つのポッドキャストコンテンツが作られ2008年8月以降無料で公開されている。これらは、2009年初頭の段階でiTunesにおけるポッドキャストの人気ランキングの89位にランクインした。本教材の使い方は簡単で、iTunesストアで「Hiroshima University Podcast」を検索するか、直接以下のホームページにアクセスすればよい。<http://pod.flare.hiroshima-u.ac.jp/cms/>

さらに、本論文では、オンライン上でアクセスできるさまざまな英語リスニング用ポッドキャストに関する83人の大学一年生の意見について概観する。日本語で行われたこの調査の結果によれば、90%の学生は、彼らが視聴したポッドキャスト教材について「とても良い」あるいは「良い」と評価した。その内訳は、「とても良い」が36%で、「良い」が54%であった。なお、広島大学のポッドキャスト教材は学生アクセス可能なポッドキャスト教材全体の平均よりも高く評価されているが、学生からは今後の改善方法も寄せられた。