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Podcasting as a Teaching Tool

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教育ツールとしてのポッドキャスティング

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　インターネットは人々の生活に一体化している。情報アクセスが今ほど容易になったことはなく，このテクノロジー活用方法の将来性は限りない。インターネットのおかげで，今日，教育者は学生の特定のニーズや関心に合わせて授業計画・調整することができる。この論文は「ポッドキャスティング」が，どのように学習者に学習意欲を起こさせ，教育体験を活性化させるかを実証するものである。

Introduction

With the technological advances made in recent years, communication has become much more efficient while at the same time, access to information is more readily available than ever before. Professionals and laypersons alike are now able to retrieve information, news, and data with ease unimaginable just a few years ago. Teaching methodologies have developed alongside these advances and potentials for incorporating the technological gains into teaching are just beginning to surface. The use of CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning) and establishment of learning laboratories at educational institutions has given educators additional tools to teach in a much broader context. However, CALL still follows the traditional teaching method in a sense that learners have to sit in a classroom and follow instructions given by their teacher. It is evident that people prefer more personalized and convenient methods that accommodate their needs and schedules. The success of email, chat rooms, blogs, and cell-phone texting no doubt owes a great deal to people's preference for convenience and immediacy. This preference extends towards education and podcasting more than any

other recent innovation. It is a natural medium for education.

Podcasting has the potential to make educational materials more efficient, accessible focused and more importantly, experiential. Although podcasting just started a couple of years ago, its broadcasts have already reached tens of millions of people globally. Once utilized, podcasting may revitalize the educational system and motivate both teachers and students into becoming more innovative and independent. This paper concentrates on how podcasting was incorporated into the authors' weekly lesson plans.

Podcasting, "Revolution" and "Passion."

Readers and listeners of literature and podcasts on podcasting will find that two words come up again and again. As the host of Podgrunt, Craig Syverson, says, "You might be thinking, 'What's the big deal? We have been getting audio and video over the Internet for a long time now.' Well the difference is in the way that file is delivered to your computer" (Syverson, 2006). True enough, even most computer novices have been able to access audio content on the Internet for nearly a decade now and many of us can still recall the excitement we felt when we first were able to listen to information from the Internet rather than just read it. Many of us had high expectations for that new technology. "Real-Audio, Quicktime, and Windows Media have all promised in their own way to revolutionize the way we enjoy 'radio.' Yet the revolution never happened with these products" (Geoghegan, 2005: 5-6). That has all changed since the advent of the podcast. Never before has there been such fervor over Internet-based audio content. By contrast with previous ham-handed software packages "podcasting is automatic, it's easy to control by the listener, it's portable, and it's always available" (Geoghegan, 2005: 6).

Briefly stated, a podcast is an audio file, usually an mp3, which, via RSS feed, can be downloaded to a user's computer. In simpler terms, podcasting is similar to a radio show that is broadcast on the Internet and is readily available to be downloaded into individual users' computers or mp3 players. A show can be recorded with some basic software on most computers and broadcast instantly throughout the world. Any person with access to the Internet can listen to podcasts no matter where he or she lives. There are thousands of podcast programs on the Internet, covering topics such as sports, music, movies, science, politics and of course English. One big advantage of podcasting over conventional radio is that users are able to listen to their favorite program anywhere and anytime. Once a listener subscribes to a show, the program is downloaded to his or her computer automatically. Podcasts can be listened to either through a user's computer or portable mp3 player.

The term "podcast" got its name from former MTV host Adam Curry who created the first podcast receiving software in mid 2004. In a 2007 interview, Curry described a podcast as "a form of on-line audio . . . which has been going on the Internet for a long, long time. What really made it happen. . . is the fact that we have mp3 players. That's what really gave people a disconnection from the network. It's asynchronous communications. You download it, you take it with you, and listen to it when it's convenient for you and you can also provide feedback in the same asynchronous manner" (Walch, 2006).

For many people, the most powerful advantage of podcasting over previous platforms, however, is not the ease of access, but the ease of production. "A stage has been erected" on which common people can "stand tall and be heard: the Internet. The price of admission is some basic equipment and a desire to communicate—that's all" (Geoghegan, 2005: 2). For people with little or no knowledge of podcasting, it would only take less than ten days to learn how to produce a simple program. Craig Patchett, the creator of Behind the Scenes podcast, recently attended a podcasting exposition for a second year and he commented one of the most impressive things he had noticed was the fact that many people who had come the previous year as listeners were returning as content providers (Patchett, 2006). For an increasing number of creative people, podcasting is not just a hi-tech world of digital mics and microchips, but a medium through which they can express themselves. One attendee at the expo said that he was there to learn how to make successful artists of currently unsigned musicians currently making music exclusively on the Internet. Another who, as a mother who is trying to be a "stay-at-home mom," expressed the feeling that she maintained a feeling of connectedness by creating her own podcast called "What to Feed the Kids." She described her experience at the previous year's expo as an "exciting thing to be around to see something that is a brand new industry and seeing it take its baby-steps and it really spurred me on to start thinking about what area can I do a podcast in because I want to be involved in this." Podcasters are not only passionate about technology but also about the on-going formation of this new community. This sense of community is unique within the podcasting world. The majority of users are twenty-something, but one-third are fifty or older and "have a lot of life experience" and "the idea of sharing that, of giving back, of connecting with other people . . . is very compelling" (The Podcast Network, 2007).

One attendee said that she had heard the P-word, "passion," again and again, that the prevalent message at the expo was "follow your passion." Indeed, the P-Word turns up again and again in various podcasts. Podgrunt's Syverson states that "one of the other really cool things about podcasting is that this new method of distribution is so efficient that it allows almost anyone with a good idea and some reasonable talent to make a show about something that they have passion for" (Syverson,

2006). Morris of the Podcasting for Dummies podcast tells listeners that "the last and most important ingredient in podcast is "passion," and later that "as long as you have passion behind your content, you will achieve success in your podcast" (Morris, 2006). The advertisement for The Pickle Podcast also speaks of "passion" (Dilly, P. 2005). The Rules for the Revolution podcast is "Can I be a Star?" as her theme song is telling of the spirit of podcasting (Vogele 2006). The spirit of a revolution that is not only technical, but also social is perhaps best stated in the book Podcasting for Dummies: "The revolution will not be televised; it will be podcast" (Geoghegan, 2005: 2).

Podcasting has clearly struck a nerve that RealAudio, Quicktime, and Windows Media never touched and if your passion is teaching, then including podcasting in your repertoire of methodologies might be a great idea. In a language-learning context, the flexibility and mobility of podcasting can help educators reach their students in a more efficient way. Neither teacher nor students are bound by time and place. Programs can focus on a general audience or be designed in a way that meets the needs or requirement of a skill in a course. Quite a few other educators have already come to that conclusion. Yale, Oxford and Berkeley Universities all offer a variety of lectures as podcasts for free download. In April, 2007, a look at the education category at i-tunes showed that out of the 105 podcasts, fifty-seven were language centered and of the top twenty-five, twenty were language instruction. The top ten were also language instruction. A general search for podcasts which include the word English in the title showed over forty podcasts in language instruction and a power search of all podcasts in the educational category showed that seven of the top one hundred were language instruction. Given the wide range of topics in the category in education, 7% is no small slice of the pie.

Podcasting for the Classroom Use

Due to limited number of teaching hours available to instructors at many universities in Japan, many English teachers agree that there is not enough time to teach the language effectively. The authors of this article primarily teach English communication at the university where this project was implemented, and this means the focus is on listening and speaking skills. Podcasting was found to be an excellent tool in providing motivated learners with additional practice in listening. Weekly radio lessons were designed to review and recycle lessons around the same topics or grammatical points covered in the class. Having a unified syllabus was helpful in selecting and planning weekly podcasts for the teachers, teaching different classes. There was also no problem with students having access to a computer as all freshmen at Seigakuin University are required to purchase a laptop. In addition, the

school offers various facilities where learners could have access to a computer if needed. However, there was initially some difficulty in explaining to students how to access the podcast, even when step-by-step handouts were distributed in Japanese.

The novelty of the shows and higher-level students' interest in the podcast were some favorable factors in initiating and running the program. However, the novelty had a shelf-life that varied between class levels, departments and between individual students.

It should also be mentioned that from the beginning, it was the intention of the authors to involve students in the program production so that their participation would lead to more motivation and exposure to English, which in turn could result in improved language ability. Nevertheless, the demands of releasing a program every Monday morning made this quite difficult, if not unfeasible. The reasons for this difficulty included the problem of coordinating meetings with the students outside of class and the task of single-handedly training each student applicant in the use of the recording and production hardware and software.

Planning Stages: Students

One of the first decisions the authors had to make was what kind of programs they wanted to broadcast. In fact, the real question was what kind of programs would attract and maintain the interest of students while generate practical learning opportunities. During discussion and brainstorming sessions with other colleagues, it was decided to present the podcast, which was named Seigakuin Radio Broadcast, as a radio program starting with the school news, then an interview, followed by an English lesson, a quiz, and finally some music. In the first semester when the program was broadcast, the news mainly covered sporting or musical events involving Seigakuin University students. Some interviews were conducted with foreign students (China, Korea, America, etc.) asking them about their experience living in Japan. Some Japanese students with overseas experience were also interviewed. The weekly English lessons followed the course syllabuses of Seigakuin English Program for the spring semester and the topics were; Greetings and Personal Information, School and Work, Family, and Daily Routines. The quiz section of the program usually included a riddle where students had to listen and send in their answers through email for a chance to get a free lunch ticket. The music was either generated by the students or David Gann.

The interviews centered around the cultural aspect of foreign students living in Japan or about Japanese students' experience on study abroad programs. The interview questions were written in advance and given to students (See Appendix One). This was to give them enough preparation time and

reduce the pressure of speaking English and recording a radio program at the same time. The weekly lesson plans also went through some preparation, as both authors wrote, exchanged, and edited each lesson before broadcasting it on the radio. Most of the lessons were scripted and comments will be made regarding their effectiveness later in this paper.

The length of the program was another factor to consider and once again, through consultation with other colleagues, it was agreed that each program should generally run about fifteen to twenty minutes to keep the students' attention and not to bore them with a lengthy program.

Planning Stages; Teachers

Besides working with students to write or edit the news and interviews, the main task of the authors was to plan and write weekly lessons. As to how to design these lessons, what topics and grammatical points to cover, and in what order to present them, referring to the course syllabi of our university English program was the easiest and most logical solution. The syllabi and modules center around a similar theme or topic with some focus on certain grammatical points.

Two approaches to the English Lesson were used. Initially, the authors were not polished at speaking at length while being recorded and the conversations were scripted. The method used was the development of what Gann termed a *conversation garden*. In a continuous correspondence between the two authors, several conversations covering differing topics and highlighting various idioms and target structures were *cultivated*. Common sense suggested that such a method would produce scripted-sounding, unnatural conversations. In fact, when the authors initially tried recording spontaneous chats, the results sounded forced and artificial. The scripted conversations, by contrast, sounded natural and relaxed (See Appendix Two). A certain level of *mic-fright* in the case of the chats and conversely the confidence gained by knowing what one was about to say in the case of the scripted conversations were the reason for this. As the authors became more comfortable and experienced at gauging, controlling conversation length and sticking to the subject, they gradually began recording more chats again. It was agreed that both methods have advantages and disadvantages. The advantages of scripting are that the quality of the conversations can be controlled and, if need be, edited and rerecorded with great ease. Also, *transcripts* of the conversations can be provided on the Seigradio homepage for students who want to check their listening skills or supplement listening practice with reading. The advantage of chats is that they can be recorded anytime with little preparation so that if the authors see that a listening segment covering material from a particular unit is needed for the following Monday, they can record it on the spot—and if after recording, the results seem un-

satisfactory, parts or all of the chat can be rerecorded.

Since podcasting has been around for only a few years, educators involved in making them have to rely on limited support and basically learn everything from the scratch. This is not to say that the task is insurmountable, but it requires some technical knowledge and initiatives. There are also sites on the Internet which can assist teachers in starting and expanding a podcast program.

Students Participation

From beginning when it was announced that a radio program would start broadcasting at Seigakuin University, a sense of excitement and curiosity was generated among the students. Posters were posted around the campus and applications were made available for those who wanted to become a part of the podcasting team. No restrictions were put on the applicants' eligibility since it was not really clear what kind of help was needed (at the beginning stages) and the authors did not wish to turn away enthusiastic students who wanted to contribute. However, perhaps because of students' schedules, the authors were not overwhelmed by a great number of applications.

A few students were recruited as part of the podcasting team and they were responsible for gathering news on various club activities and events around the campus. Once it was decided what kind of news was to be announced, students wrote it in Japanese and then translated it into English. The English translation was then shown to one of the authors for final editing. Some interviews were conducted by students while others by the teachers. The authors wrote the interview questions and gave them to both the interviewee and interviewer for preparation. Since Seigakuin University has foreign students from countries such as China, Korea, Sri Lanka, Nepal, India, and America, many listeners were naturally interested in topics such as culture, student life styles, interests, and study habit. A few Japanese students with overseas experience were also interviewed and their opinions regarding similar matters were discussed as well. These interviews seemed to be popular among the listeners because they gave some insight into life in different countries as well as giving the participant a feeling of accomplishment, conducting interviews in English.

Benefits of Podcasting

With the main focus on improving students' English ability, the podcasts and their contents concentrated on one or more skills such as writing, speaking, or listening. Although very few students partici-

pated in writing the news, the process of translating and announcing the news in English (Japanese as well) can contribute to their improved writing and speaking skills if continued.

It might be said that the main benefit of podcasting can be utilized in listening. Learners were asked to listen to the podcast, which was released every Monday morning. In the higher level classes a weekly quiz was made based on the content of each interview/lesson and handed out to students in the class (See Appendix Three). Students turned in their homework the following week. In addition to that, the last question in each quiz required the students to write a short paragraph and e-mail it to their teacher. Since the students could listen to each podcast as many times as they wished, they had a better chance of answering most or all of the questions correctly, which can result in improved listening and higher confidence. In the case of the lower level classes, four relatively easy true-or-false questions were written and distributed on a Thursday or Friday after presumably students had had ample time to listen to the podcast (See Appendix Four). The quiz was taken in class. The instructor collected the quizzes at random on five different occasions. At four points per quiz, the five collected quizzes accounted for twenty percent of each student's final grade.

One major advantage of podcasting is its accessibility to students with ease and convenience. It can be said that podcasting, contributed to the students' interest in broadcasting, while at the same time provided opportunities for learners to improve their speaking, writing, and listening skills. Although the participating classes for this project were limited to only a few, the idea can easily be adopted, incorporated, and expanded into any teaching plan. Writing and listening tasks can be assigned as homework and referred to podcasts.

Providing students with opportunities to study at their own convenience can increase the likelihood of participation and higher motivation.

Conclusion

For those who wish to introduce podcasts into their classes, we advise not to be afraid of the initial difficulty of mastering the technology. Podcasts are produced by people of all ages and all walks of life, from 18 to 80 and from the inner-city streets of L.A. or the Bronx to the homes of families to the hallowed halls of Oxford or Harvard. Actually, the technical challenges are the easiest to surmount and once surmounted become second nature. What does not change is the formidable problems of planning and executing the production. This can be very enjoyable during some stages, but it requires a lot of patience and coordinating skills.

That said, for those who have never tried podcasting, a 20-minute program requires an enormous

amount of time and preparation. Naturally, with more experience, the process can become more efficient, but still, producing a podcast involves certain steps that cannot be avoided or circumvented. However, from educational point of view, podcasting has enormous potentials that can make teaching and learning fun and rewarding. Its accessibility, convenience, adaptability, and uniqueness make utilizing the benefits of podcasting in the classroom a logical decision.

For those who might consider taking up this project, we advise starting out modestly with an initial two-year goal, releasing a podcast every two weeks. The following year these can be reused and new podcasts can be released in the alternately open weeks.

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Appendix One
(Fang Ping's Interview)

1. Tell us a little about yourself; where you are from, your family, how long you have been in Japan?
2. What brought you to Japan?
3. What do you like about life here in Japan?
4. What has been difficult for you to adjust?
5. What are some of the similarities between Japan and China?
6. And how about some differences between the two countries?
7. You speak three languages, what is your secret to speaking both Japanese and English so well?
8. What are your plans for the next few years?

Appendix Two
(Hobbies and Interests)

D: Hi, Mehran. How are you doing today?

M: I feel good. And yourself?

D: Not bad, although it could be better.

M: It's that time of the year again. Humidity, tiredness, and work. They all wear you down.

D: I'm ready for a vacation, Mehran. I'm too tired.

M: I think you are working too hard, David.. Don't you do anything fun beside teaching? Don't you have any hobbies, interests? You know. Something fun to do.

D: In fact I do have lots of interests. I enjoy cycling, playing and listening to music, and I also like to read.

M: That's great. I wish I were like you.

D: What do you do for fun? Just work and save money?

M: Yes, I love money. Money, money, money, ...

D: No, seriously.

M: Well, I like to play and watch sports. I also like to read. And I love watching movies. All kinds of movies, except the horror ones.

D: You know, just today in one of my classes, we were talking about movies, music, and sports and the question in the textbook kind of caught my eyes.

M: What do you mean?

D: Well, as you have seen yourself, many textbooks teach students "What's your hobby?" and they usually answer by saying my hobby is playing baseball or reading.

M: To be honest with you, I think that's a kind of strange question, or better to say, the answers are not really correct.

D: That's right. A hobby is something more like collecting stamps, making model airplanes, or .....

M: So, what's the correct question, especially for young people?

D: We can ask, "What do you usually do in your free time?" or "What do you like to do for fun?"

M: And we can answer by saying; I like to play sports or I enjoy watching movies. Right?

D: Right.

Appendix Three
(Podcasting Quiz # 6)

Name _____

1. Where is Freddy from?
2. How does he like it here in Japan?
3. Has he had any culture shock yet?
4. What was his image of Japan before he came? Is it any different now?
5. How does he like the food? Is it very different from the US?
6. How good is his Japanese?
7. What places in Japan has he visited so far?
8. What does he think of Seigakuin University?
9. What are some of the differences he has observed between Japanese and American students?
10. How much longer is he planning to be here?
11. Is he going back to school once he returns to the US?
12. What is he studying?
13. Does he think that he might visit Japan again?

14. What do you think of Freddy? E-mail your answer to me.

Appendix Four
(Podcasting Quiz # 1)
My Neighbor, Yasumi / Introductions

Name _____

1. Where is Yasumi's husband from?
    a. Africa.
    b. Kyoto.
    c. Brazil.

2. Yasumi's hobbies include:
    a. Reading and writing.
    b. Farming and cooking.
    c. Tomatoes and cabbage.

3. When meeting someone for the first time it is fine to say:
    a. Who are you?
    b. How are you?
    c. See you later.

4. When you speak to your teacher or older person it is best to call them:
    a. Mr. or Mrs. and their last (family) name.
    b. Mr. and Mrs. and then their first name.
    c. Just their first name.