

Podcast in Process: Assessing the Success of a University Podcast as a Non-Compulsory Listening Resource

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This article reviews the success of an English language podcast as a non-compulsory listening resource at the university level in China. Following a survey suggesting that authentic spoken English resources are beyond the capability of many students at this level, an English language ‘talk show’ podcast was created and released to students once a week for the 14 weeks of an academic semester. The podcast was hosted by three speakers who tailored the content and level of English to suit students’ ability and interests. To assess the popularity of the resource, weekly download numbers were examined alongside 46 emails from listeners. Although the podcast saw an overall decline in popularity over the semester, positive feedback from a number of students suggested that the tailored nature of this type of podcast has considerable potential to attract students to listen in their own time.

Introduction

The word podcast comes from a combination of the word ‘broadcast’, and Apple’s hugely successful iPod (Evans, 2008). Podcasts present series of audio or video files, which users can download and access in their own time, either online or on personal media players. Hammersley (2004) cited the word for the first time in the UK’s Guardian newspaper and since then the popularity of podcasting has increased exponentially, with podcasts now covering subjects as diverse as politics, sport, music, comedy and, of course, education.

In terms of language education, podcasting websites have achieved remarkable commercial success. The ‘Pod101’ series, for example, expanded from a single website offering online Japanese classes in 2005 to accompany the offering of courses in 22 languages and boasting over 100 million downloads by 2012 (JapanesePod101, 2012). Alongside such commercial successes, podcasts have also been created specifically for and by single institutions, with Evans (2008) reporting positive results from a study using podcasts to deliver ‘revision lectures’ at the University of London. This paper looks at podcasting as a way to deliver a supplementary English resource, offering interesting and relevant material in a context

which, as will be explained later, is characterised by limited access to such material.

Driven in part by Templer’s (2008) call to allow students to master simple aspects of the language before asking them to climb the “‘Everest’ of complex English”, a weekly English language podcast was established at Xi’an Jiaotong-Liverpool University (XJTLU) in Suzhou, China. The XJTLU Podcast was designed as a resource to be dipped into; it was neither compulsory nor focused on any specific area of language and, therefore, its success cannot be judged by student performance. Instead, it is evaluated by the degree to which students, knowing that no university credit was at stake, used the resource. The success criteria were, in quantitative terms, the numbers of students who accessed the podcast, and in qualitative terms, the reactions of those students to what they heard.

Context

Alongside previous work praising the potential of podcasts in education (Lazzari, 2009), a number of conditions at XJTLU convinced us to establish an English language podcast. XJTLU is marketed as an international institution; the use of English as a teaching medium, strong links with the University of Liverpool (including

Figure 1. “Apart From Study, How Much Time do you Spend on the Internet Listening to English (Online News/Radio/Sports/Commentary)?”









Response	Average	Total
0 to 1 hours per week	 57%	50
1 to 3 hours per week	 24%	21
3 to 6 hours per	 14%	12
More than 6 hours	 5%	4

Figure 2. “When you Watch English Language Movies, Do You Use Subtitles?”

Response	Average	Total
Yes, English subtitles	 34%	30
Yes, Chinese subtitles	 62%	54
No	 1%	1
I don't usually watch movies in English	 2%	2

the option to study there for two years), and a high number of academic staff from outside of China do a good job of maintaining an international atmosphere. However, in terms of creating an English speaking environment *outside* of the classroom, the fact that 98% of the student body is Chinese makes it easy to see how opportunities for students to develop their English skills in a more relaxed environment can be limited.

Though English is used as a method of delivery at the university, a comparative lack of non-Chinese students suggests a gap between the language experience provided in XJTLU classrooms, and the students' ability to access English outside of the classroom. A pilot questionnaire administered via the university's intranet to 87 XJTLU Year 1 students also suggested a divergence between students' own communicative English ability and interests, and the level and subject matter of the majority of authentic English material available online. Fifty-seven percent of respondents reported using the internet to listen to English for less than one hour per week (Figure 1) and 96% of respondents reported the use of subtitles when watching English language movies (Figure 2). As a result, it can be concluded that a large number of students either did not want to access, did not know how to access, or simply could not understand authentic English material enough to enjoy it.

With a measure of assurance that students were not using online English resources as

much as they perhaps could, and some confidence that at least some of them would like to do so more, the XJTLU podcast was designed and created. In the following sections of this article, design considerations of the podcast are discussed and a small scale study conducted to track student interest in the podcast is described. The results of this study are then presented before we conclude with a brief evaluation of the project and a look towards potential future directions for this resource.

Design considerations

Design considerations for this project can be roughly categorised into two sections: delivery considerations and content considerations. In terms of delivery, all material was hosted by the University's online Moodle-based learning environment (referred to hereon by its local name, "ICE"). In order to distance the podcast from other supplementary listening resources, and to avoid presenting it as a type of homework, an external website was created as an 'access point' to the podcast. Upon downloading the first episode, students were automatically subscribed to the resource (meaning they had the ability to download further episodes), but could unsubscribe at any point with an email to the hosts.

Episodes were recorded weekly (with a gap in week 7 for reading week) and released online alongside a short email to subscribers alerting them to the fact that a new episode

was live. Each episode was delivered in MP3 format, with listeners given the option of downloading or streaming online. In addition to this, a text transcription of each episode was provided as well as an interactive element in the form of a short comprehension quiz or an online survey related to that week's content. The technology behind delivering each podcast was very simple, with hosts recording each episode directly onto an MP3 player, and then using a simple editing program (<http://www.free-sound-editor.com>) to add sound effects and music to each episode.

In terms of content, the podcast aimed to provide authentic material at a level that was accessible to students. With this in mind, the hosts (as XJTLU tutors) were able to use their experience with XJTLU students to judge the type and level of language to use. The podcast, it was also hoped, would contrast with the types of listening resources already available to students through the university online learning environment, which are designed specifically to improve academic listening and note-taking skills and can be rather dull. The decision was taken to record the podcast in a conversational, talk-show format, with topics for discussion driven by students themselves through email suggestions.

Hosted by a male British native speaker and two female non-native speakers (from Poland and China), the podcast exposed listeners to the different accents, personalities and international experiences of the hosts. Of a similar age and sharing the first language of the target audience, the Chinese host played a particularly important role in the podcast, acting as a positive role-model and person that students could identify with. The importance for learners of having a pronunciation role model from the same first language group as themselves has been highlighted by Jordan (2011), and it is argued that the Chinese host in this podcast fulfilled such a role. That the two other hosts are both graduates of the University of Liverpool was a pleasant coincidence, which allowed them to offer relevant and interesting material to XJTLU students, who are given the opportunity to study abroad in Liverpool.

Each episode of the podcast was essentially unscripted, giving students exposure to the type of mistakes, interruptions and false-starts that typify real life conversations in English. Special care was taken to avoid the kinds of cultural

references that can make authentic English conversations so problematic for L2 speakers, and special attention was also given to talking about subjects that were interesting and relevant to students.

A final consideration in the design of the project was maintaining student interest, as it was predicted that interest in the project could wane over the course of the semester. The voluntary nature of the podcast meant that generating and maintaining interest among students was perhaps the biggest obstacle to a successful project. In an attempt to maintain interest levels, therefore, the hosts gave students a number of ways to interact with the podcast. At the most basic level, an email account was set up for students to suggest future topics; a number of students were also selected for short interviews to be included in the podcast. Alongside this, a series of light-hearted online polls were introduced in various episodes and, finally, a competition was organised by the hosts in which students were asked to submit plans for a 'day out' in Suzhou, with the winners spending a day with the hosts. It was hoped that the hosts would be able to create positive enough impressions for this to be a legitimate source of motivation for students.

The study

Quantitative statistical data showing the frequency and amount of downloads for each episode was obtained from ICE. In addition to this, qualitative data was gathered through the analysis of a number of emails from listeners (all reported anonymously), which gave deeper insights into students' opinions on the podcast as well as future directions for the project.

With over 850 subscribers, over 6500 separate downloads and over 22000 ICE page 'clicks' over the course of the first twelve podcast episodes, use of the podcast far exceeded initial expectations in terms of popularity. In the opening weeks especially, a number of positive emails from students and pleasingly high numbers of downloads showed good levels of enthusiasm among the student body about the project. As predicted, however, the maintenance of such high levels of interest proved difficult and after six weeks, the resource seemed to have a core following with subscription numbers stabilizing. The following sections look at some of the

patterns of student activity and offer some possible explanations.

Results

Quantitative data

This section presents student uptake of the podcast; download numbers recorded by ICE were used to create graphs showing overall download numbers (Figure 3) as well as download numbers for MP3 and text files in the first seven days of each episode being online (Figure 4). As shown in Figure 3, the first episode of the podcast recorded significantly higher levels of activity than subsequent episodes. This is suggested to be the result of the novelty of the resource and students' curiosity about the project. Although the downward trend shown in Figure 3 suggests an overall decline in the popularity of the podcast as the season progressed, it must be remembered that more recent episodes had not been available online for as long as older episodes. The flexibility of the resource, which allows students to access any element of the podcast at any time means that older episodes were

Figure 3. Overall Download Numbers for Each of the 12 Episodes

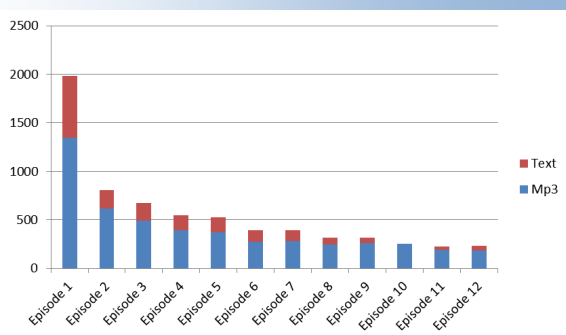
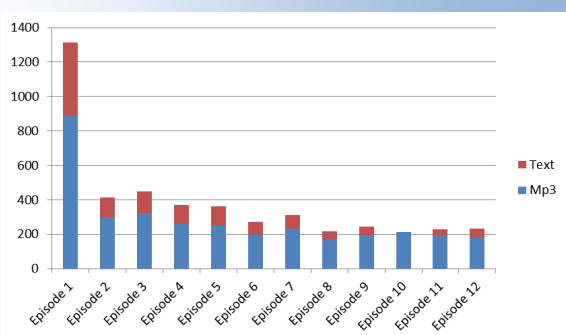


Figure 4. Download Numbers for the First Week of Each Episode



expected to have been accessed more as they had been available online for longer. Figure 4, which shows the download rates for the first week of each episode, provides a more accurate assessment of the popularity of the podcast over time.

Similar to the results shown in Figure 3, Figure 4 shows that the first episode of the podcast was accessed by a significantly higher number of students than subsequent episodes within the first week (1315 downloads of episode 1 compared with 415 in of episode 2). However, instead of an overall downward trend, the results showed robust levels of activity as the project progressed, and it was certainly heartening to see download numbers above 200 per week by the end of the project.

Qualitative data

The podcast email account received 46 emails from students in the first 8 weeks of the project. The overall response of students who emailed was very positive indeed, with a number of emails praising the ability of the hosts to provide English that was easy to understand, yet authentic and entertaining. Furthermore, the relaxed and humorous nature of the podcast also received specific commendation, with words such as 'funny' and 'interesting' appearing frequently. In terms of proposed subjects for discussion, the hosts' love-lives were particularly popular, with other suggestions including the differences between British and American culture, funny stories from the hosts' daily lives in China as well as what it is like to live in a foreign country. The overall impression created by student emails reflects the desire for light hearted and relaxed English, and strongly suggests that students are unable to locate English resources that are both authentic and easy to understand, but also of interest to them.

Conclusion

We began this article by charting the rise of podcasting as a medium to deliver sound files to large numbers of listeners. The use of this medium in education was displayed in the commercial success of language learning podcast sites as well as the reported successes of the use of podcasts in other tertiary institutions. Alongside this, the flexibility of the format convinced us that podcasting had the potential to enhance

the English language experience provided by our university (XJTLU), offering authentic English resources that were both comprehensible and enjoyable.

Having considered the type of resource that ought to be produced, a weekly talk-show based podcast was instituted at XJTLU and a small-scale study assessing the success of the resource in terms of generating and maintaining interest among students was undertaken. Using statistical data gained from the University's Moodle-based learning environment (ICE) alongside qualitative data gathered from emails received from listeners, we were able to report the success of the podcast in terms of audience numbers. With over 6500 downloads in the first 13 weeks of the project, and with a continuous audience throughout the project, we were satisfied with the performance of both the hosts' ability to provide interesting and relevant English, and the ability of the podcast format to provide an efficient and flexible platform for students to access the resource.

Although the data presented here does not reveal how exactly students use the resource, it is suggested that such concerns are relatively unimportant. What is important is that the resource was used and students, it seems, were happy that the podcast was introduced. In terms of creating future seasons of the XJTLU Podcast, the results presented in this paper provide enough evidence to justify recording and releasing subsequent podcasts. The maintenance of student interest and a consistent audience in what is a completely voluntary activity is, however, predicted to be a continuing issue of concern. It is hoped that the increasing bank of episodes will endure as an interesting, relevant and engaging resource for future cohorts of XJTLU students, who can dip into the resource as they wish and access authentic and understandable English which has some real relevance to their own lives.

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