PODCASTING: A FRESH SOLUTION FOR OLD PROBLEMS

JENNY ANG LU
National Taiwan Normal University
<jns4chat@gmail.com>

1. Introduction

This paper examines an example of how podcasts can be used to boost the listening and speaking proficiency of language learners in an EFL context. It examines the case of 1 individual learner in Taiwan, a member of the working population, who does not have prior exposure to authentic English. The study makes use of two podcasts from Voice of America (VOA) and the Bob and Rob Show. The two podcasts are chosen because the former provides samples of the use of formal English, and the latter, informal English in both American and British varieties.

The lessons are all administered online. The podcasts and their transcripts are used as teaching materials for the instruction of both listening and speaking. The VOA podcasts are used as primary teaching materials while the Bob and Rob Show podcasts are used to supplement the instruction. The participant first transcribes the VOA podcast, and is afterwards supplied with the original transcript to correct his output. The transcripts are then used to teach vocabulary and grammar in context. One Bob and Rob Show podcast is supplied to the participant for additional listening exposure. A discussion regarding the topics in the podcasts is conducted in English at the end of the week.

Preliminary findings show that the participant, while encountering numerous difficulties and setbacks in the process, benefited from these activities. He now has better awareness of the frequently-occurring co-articulation effects that are common in English connected speech. He is also gaining more confidence in his ability to comprehend English as a whole.

Taiwan has an Internet penetration level of 60.3%, and every school has at least one computer room. Meanwhile, anecdotal evidence shows that there is a proliferation of mp3 player-usage in Taiwan. Podcasting is not yet prevalent in Taiwan, but it has great potential as a primary or supplementary tool in the Taiwan EFL classroom.

Learning a language means being able to use it as a communicative tool (ACTFL, 1996). The ultimate goal of learning a language is being able to 'know how, when, and why to say what to whom' (ibid.). In order to achieve this, the language learner must first learn how to understand what is being said. The learner's listening proficiency is thus extremely important.

Most English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners in Taiwan receive an average of 7 to 9 years of formal English instruction in the language classroom. Compulsory English education starts from fifth grade and continues through secondary education and the first two semesters in college. Under the old system, it started from seventh grade (MOE, 2006).

Even with such a prodigious number of years of instruction, however, those who are fluent enough to be able to use English as a communicative tool are in the minority. Most language learners shy away from opportunities to utilize the language because it overwhelms them and it takes too much effort to understand what is written in English publications or said by native speakers. There is a discrepancy in what is learned in the language classroom and what is

actually encountered in an actual communicative context. Traditional methods of teaching in the Taiwan EFL context call for an emphasis on vocabulary and grammatical instruction (Liao, 2005); the most-frequently used skills in authentic communication, listening and speaking, are usually given less emphasis. In the cases when these skills are taught in the EFL classroom, the materials employed are usually contrived, and thus unnatural. This may be detrimental to language learners, especially those in the EFL context, since the materials from their language classes are probably the only such input they will ever receive. The lack of exposure to authentic-sounding materials may lead the learners to become very unaccustomed to real English usage. They may thus be unable to communicate efficiently in English as a result.

English is a language in which unstressed syllables are reduced in connected speech (Brown, 2006). These effects of connected speech are known as coarticulation effects. Some examples include: elision, assimilation, and liaison. Elision is the omission of one or more sounds, such as the /d/ sound in 'Sue and I' or the /er/ sound in 'comfortable'. Assimilation is the process whereby a sound becomes similar, or is assimilated, to an adjacent sound. Examples include 'could have = coulda' and 'have to = hafta'. Liaison is the addition of a linking sound, such as the /w/ in 'Joey (jo-wee)'. Students usually have problems with such coarticulation effects due to the fact that the pauses in between sounds have been removed and may sometimes make two words sound like one. In addition, language learners, especially those in an EFL context, are not given much exposure to coarticulation effects in their listening practice as most English listening instruction materials are usually designed to remove these features to aid understanding. The listening materials are presented in careful speech where each syllable is uttered clearly and pauses are injected between words.

Dictation has long been used in the language classroom to train language learner's listening ability (Stansfield, 1985; Lightfoot, 2006). According to Montalvan (2006), dictation is 'one of the few exercises consistently employed throughout the history of language teaching'. Such practice has also proven conducive in the EFL classroom (Kiany & Shiramiry, 2002). However, such activity is not frequently seen in this context, primarily because teachers themselves are non-native speakers. In the case of the EFL classroom in Taiwan, there is yet another reason for this. The classes are usually exam-oriented, and as the high stakes examinations in the country are written examinations, language teaching in the classroom is therefore geared towards vocabulary and grammar instruction (Chen & Wei, 1999). There is no place for the teaching of communication skills because these are not tested in the exams.

This can be changed, however, especially with the advent of podcasting. Podcasting is a portmanteau word comprised of the words iPod and broadcasting. Podcasts are essentially audio files that, for the most part, can be freely downloaded from the Internet. The number of podcast feeds under management recently surpassed the total number of radio stations worldwide with a total number of 86,083 (FeedBurner, 2007), making it easier than ever for the language learner to build his/her own listening exposure environment. Aside from this, topics and issues discussed in podcasts vary far and wide, and the language learner is certain to find something of his or her liking. Moreover, there is also a multitude of podcasts that cater especially to ESL/EFL learners (Stanley, 2006). Although English is learned in a foreign context in Taiwan, the level of Internet connectivity makes it possible for learners to foster a virtual language environment to assist their language learning (Godwin-Jones, 1998). This, too, can be used by EFL teachers to fill the need for dictation activities in the classroom.

The purpose of this case study is to raise awareness of the possibilities the Internet holds for teachers and learners in the EFL classroom, especially with regard to listening ability. The impressive numbers of podcasts currently available without cost on the Internet are potential resources that can be utilized in the EFL classroom. The study also aims to raise awareness of the importance of listening and speaking instruction in the EFL classroom. This study aims to answer the following research questions:

1). Does transcription and imitation raise awareness of coarticulation effects that occur in natural connected speech?

2). What kinds of problems does the participant encounter?

3). What is the participant's attitude toward such an instruction?

2. Methods

Settings and Participant

The participant of this case study is a 23-year-old male office worker who received his formal education in Taiwan. His first encounter with English was through a junior high preparatory cram school during the summer before he entered seventh grade. Over the approximately 8 years of formal English education he received in the school system, most of the lessons were delivered through teacher-led vocabulary and grammar-based instruction with rote memorization and information regurgitation on his part. He noticed a lack of aural and oral instruction in the language classroom, and now that he is part of the workforce, he is starting to understand the importance of being able to communicate in English.

The participant has had little exposure to authentic English usage, mostly because he found real-context English too difficult to comprehend. He stated instances of picking up local English

newspapers and finding that he did not understand most of what was written. He also mentioned encountering native speakers of English and not being able to sustain even a simple conversation with them. Both such instances led to his anxiety and frustration with regards to English learning and usage.

Instruments

The following instruments were used in this study: 1) mp3DirectCut, 2) Audacity, and 3) Voice of America (VOA) Special English podcasts.

mp3DirectCut is available as a freeware tool that, as its name suggests, can cut or edit MP3 files without much complication. You can cut parts of MP3 files and put them together and save as a new file. You can also split one mp3 file into two or more files.

Audacity is a free and easy-to-use open source audio editor and recorder that can be used across various operating systems. It is easy to use and is popular among podcasters for its good recording quality and noise reduction capabilities. Files can be exported as either WAV or MP3 (via the LAME MP3 Encoder, downloaded separately).

VOA Special English audio files cater to English language learners. The vocabulary used in the audio files is limited to approximately 1,500 words. Pronunciation is intentionally made clearer and short pauses between words are added. It is spoken at a slower pace and sentences are kept short and only contain one main idea. The topics and issues discussed in VOA Special English podcasts vary far and wide, ranging from religion, politics, and science to education, social issues, and health. Podcast episodes are freely downloadable in MP3 format. Complete transcripts are provided along with the MP3 files. For the purposes of the study, the podcasts,

usually lasting for more than three minutes, were further truncated into approximately 200-word mini-clips to prevent from overwhelming the participant.

3. Procedures

The study was conducted on the Internet via Microsoft Network (MSN) Messenger, a free online instant messaging software, over a period of four weeks. In total, four podcasts, one for each week, were used in the study. Prior to the study, the participant was given a brief orientation regarding the mechanics of the study and the materials to be used. The general procedures are outlined in Table 1.

	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7
Activities	Transcriptions			Comprehension	Imitation		

Table 1. A Brief Outline of the Study

On the first day of each week, the participant spent one hour transcribing the podcast sent to him via MSN messenger. The topic had been chosen by the participant beforehand. The topics of the podcasts used in the four-week period included immigration, adoption, health, and leisure. No clues were provided regarding the object of transcription but the participant was allowed to use whatever resources he had available. At the end of the hour, the participant-generated transcripts were collected and errors were marked in red. The second and third days were dedicated to correcting these errors and to transcribing previously untranscribed sections, if any. As was the case for the first day, the participant-generated transcripts were collected at the end of the hour on the second and third days and errors were again marked in red. The original transcript of the podcast was provided to the participant at the end of the third day. The fourth day of each week was dedicated to understanding the content and language of

the podcast in detail. Vocabulary and sentence patterns were probed when necessary. On the fifth day of each week, the participant was given an hour to produce an audio file, using Audacity, of him reading the transcript in a fashion as similar to the original podcast as is possible. The recorded output was collected at the end of the hour, and salient mistakes in pronunciation or stress were marked in red. The sixth and seventh day were spent fine tuning his pronunciation and intonation. Throughout the study, the participant kept a self-reflection journal. An interview was administered after the experiment.

4. Results and Discussion

The participant's progress throughout the four-week treatment period was monitored in part through his performance in the transcription activities and in part through his self-reflection journal entries. The results of his transcription performance are shown in Table 2.

It is clear that the accuracy rate of the participant's initial attempts varied across topics. This was partly due to the participant's personal understanding of certain topics and their commonly-used terminologies. In addition, it is evident from the results shown in the table that most of the work was accomplished on the first day. The number of words additionally transcribed correctly on the second and third days were, on average, significantly less.

The participant recorded the transcription process and his comments and suggestions in a self-reflection journal. He reported that when he got the podcasts, he first listened to them three times to get a primary understanding of the content, to look for trouble spots, and to try to recognize as many words as possible. He also reported that while transcribing, he first typed in words that he knew. As for the words that were unfamiliar, he wrote down what he thought they

sounded like and searched for probable words in dictionaries or search engines or tried to make inferences from the context.

Topic: Immigration (Total Number of Words: 190)				
Week 1	Words Corrrectly Transcribed	Accuracy Rate (%)	Outcome Increase	Percentage of Improvement
1	131	69		
2	159	80.5	28	15%
3	168	88.4	9	5%
Topic: Adoption (Total Number of Words: 203)				
Week 2	Words Corrrectly Transcribed	Accuracy Rate (%)	Outcome Increase	Percentage of Improvement
1	159	78.3		
2	181	89.2	22	11%
3	190	93.6	9	4%
Topic: Health (Total Number of Words: 210)				
Week 3	Words Corrrectly Transcribed	Accuracy Rate (%)	Outcome Increase	Percentage of Improvement
1	153	72.9		
2	170	81	17	8%
3	182	86.7	12	6%
Topic: Leisure (Total Number of Words: 266)				
Week 4	Words Corrrectly Transcribed	Accuracy Rate (%)	Outcome Increase	Percentage of Improvement
1	228	85.7		
2	241	90.6	13	5%
3	250	93.4	9	3%

Table 2. Transcription Performance Monitor Chart

It was hypothesized that through repeated exposure to the podcasts, the learner will be able to incidentally learn such features as coarticulation effects or vocabulary items and grammatical structures. During the interview, the participant stated his agreement that there are such

instances. He believed, however, that four podcasts in four weeks is too few. He reported that his vocabulary size had not grown much.

Nevertheless, the participant reported a better understanding of such coarticulation effects as elision, assimilation, and liaison. He stated difficulties transcribing when he encountered instances of liaison, such as 'of up' in 'of up to' and such instances of assimilation as the joined sound in 'based this'. Through repeated exposure to the podcasts, however, he became more aware of these features. He also tried imitating these features while producing the audio output.

The biggest problem the participant reported hindering his efforts was his small vocabulary size. In his self-reflection, he mentioned encountering difficulties in transcribing the podcasts because he did not recognize many of the words. In addition, he had little experience with coarticulation effects prior to the study and reported not being able to differentiate whether the utterances he heard were single or multiple words. The participant admitted feeling overly anxious when he committed too many mistakes. He reported anxiety on his first encounter with the podcasts. Although VOA Special English podcasts were already simplified for ease of understanding, they were still much more similar to authentic English usage when compared with those the learner had previously encountered in the language classroom.

Overall, the participant held a positive attitude toward the use of podcasts in language learning. He agreed that these materials and this form of instruction can prepare him more for authentic usage of English as opposed to its classroom counterpart.

5. Conclusion and Further Work

In this paper, I have investigated the use of podcasts in listening instruction in an EFL context. The outcome of such instruction as reported by the participant and understood from the interview is promising. Podcasts can provide EFL learners with the resources they need to expose themselves to English as it is used in real contexts.

Taiwan has an Internet penetration level of 60.3% (ETC, 2006), and every school has at least one computer room. Meanwhile, anecdotal evidence shows that there is a proliferation of MP3 player-usage in Taiwan. Podcasting is not yet prevalent in Taiwan, but it has great potential for being used as a primary or supplementary tool for the instruction of EFL in Taiwan.

However, it should be noted that, as a case study, the results of the study cannot be taken as evidence for the overall effectiveness of such instruction in the Taiwan EFL context. Future work can be done to further probe the possibilities of using authentic listening materials, especially in the form of podcasts, as well as the use of transcription activities in the EFL classroom. Other possibilities include a longitudinal study of the effects of such instruction on EFL learners and the 'extensive listening' of podcasts and their effects on the language proficiency of language learners. For lower-level learners, however, there may be a need for advance organizers and vocabulary supplementation or word-level transcription as committing too many mistakes may overwhelm and discourage the learner.

Audio transcription is a valuable supplement in the language classroom; video transcription should also be considered as it supplies additional visual context clues to assist the language learner. In addition, learners should be encouraged to make use of free online resources to

help them create a language learning environment to facilitate and add excitement to the language learning process.

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