

INTEGRATING PODCASTS WITH COURSEWARE

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1. Introduction

Podcasts and other distributed media run the spectrum from light-hearted and irreverent imitations of the morning drive radio format to more serious academic or specific purpose or topical programs to student generated podcasts. Regardless of format, we are obliged to ask what utility these media artifacts can have for language learners if they are unrelated to a student's individual needs, their study path, and, more generally to the program needs expressed in a school's curriculum? This paper argues that podcasts have relatively low student benefit unless integrated to student needs and that the highest integration provides the greatest benefit.

The first objection to this hypothesis is one raised whenever a new technology is challenged and needs its champion. Motivation, we are lead to believe, will be vastly enhanced by podcasts even if unrelated to curricula and disorganized into entertainment segments that are quickly forgotten. There is some inherent educational value, we are to believe, in that students or trainees are attending, however uncomprehendingly, to the podcast. This is a common belief when hi-tech and educators consort. It is an unproven claim, of course. At most, the conditioning that is being claimed is more likely to be conditioning to technology rather than to English. Entertainment podcasts lacking language control or syllabus may have benefit for

higher level learners who have some clue what is being said. For others, the likelier outcome is frustration at the input and creation of expectation that teachers should be goofy. Student generated podcasts are a version of student presentation in a static format with the added distraction of technology.

2. Podcasting and the Curriculum

Curricula controlled podcasts are obviously more welcome. Here too a problem arises. If the podcast is unrelated to what students are studying it can be more a distraction from than a reinforcement of their study path. Podcast play lists with relation to curricula can overcome this liability if the information is available on the web in the students' native language for easy reference. What is needed here is teacher buy-in so that teachers can coach and encourage use of appropriate podcasts.

That brings us immediately to integration, our main theme here. Teacher commitment is a hard-purchased dynamic in education today. In the Japanese case, universities are under great pressure to outsource teaching and reduce the institutional commitment to integration by ever-greater use of unsecured part-time instructors on short-term contracts. The professional standing of many Japanese university English programs (and that is a word needing scare quotes) is under great threat, in short. Any influence that works to advance integration under these circumstances has even greater benefit, just as any influence that further undermines integration has amplified negative consequences. So how is integration best described and what role can podcasts best serve?

As a developer of language training systems, we submit that a properly implemented, teacher-led, technology solution *can* have great benefit. What are the elements of an integrated technology solution? I would consider these as paramount:

- 1). teacher orientation and training in key tasks
- 2). student orientations in their native language
- 3). placement testing to ensure best use of time and attention
- 4). courseware with a robust feedback loop and conscientiously prepared sequencing
- 5). on-going testing to ensure comprehension and mastery
- 6). analysis and reporting functionality for both teacher and student understanding of progress at individual and class levels
- 7). automated on-line tutoring to give students immediate access to study habit correction advice
- 8). support for classroom use, blended learning formats for teachers
- 9). quality assurance mechanisms built-into the program for feedback at all levels
- 10). supplementary material that is clearly related to specific aspects of curricula and can be accessed on-demand

If this seems a tall order, it is one that we set as our development challenge. Our on-going fulfillment of this challenge has become a world-wide company, winning many awards at all ages and levels in schools and companies. PodCcasts have a definite role. We use podcasts and the associated ScreenCasts for: (1) teacher orientation, (2) student orientations, and (10) supplementary material.

Teachers in any technology implementation face a learning curve. This is usually endured in the school of hard knocks, with very little if any training. Schools already hiring part-timers on the principle of saving labor costs are unwilling to agitate that principle by requiring uncompensated time from part time teachers. So part time teachers are very poorly situated to discharge the very responsibilities for which they are hired. In consequence, they are more likely to find the learning curve of a technology implementation frustrating, uncomfortable, and communicate this attitude to students. No teacher, after all, wants to be in a situation where their inability to demonstrate mastery is on exhibit.

We have designed a series of short teacher orientation modules, delivered by ScreenCast, to directly benefit the overworked, underpaid, and highly stressed teacher who is dropped into a technology implementation (in this case, ours) chosen by others and with which they are unfamiliar. These resources are available at: <<http://www.dyned.com/dyned/japan/html/supteach.htm>>. Some modules are descriptive, some operational, and one quasi-theoretical. The purpose is to help equip teachers climb the learning curve. In real world use I would recommend that these be assigned by a coordinator and key points reviewed in a teachers' meeting.

As with teachers, so also with students. The importance of proper student orientation cannot be overstated. Orientation (and re-orientation) is an on-going aspect of quality assurance in a properly implemented and thought through program. Here also we provide on-line ScreenCasts, and these are available in both English or in Japanese (in our case). You may access these at:

<http://www.dyned.com/dyned/japan/htm/so_in.html>. The focus here is, of course, practical. The goal is to rapidly reinforce the most effective study habits. Learner autonomy is amplified when a positive feedback loop is nourished. We include one quasi-theoretical orientation because, of course, some who study English do intend to become English teachers and we have a responsibility to encourage that aspect of their study as well.

Why ScreenCasts and not podcasts for these orientations? Effective multimedia is by nature multimodal. We assume that most orientations will be either in school or at home and, in either case, using the computer. Since a system and a process is described in the orientations, visual representations of the described aspects of the system are most memorable. Likewise, text reinforcement of key points is considered useful whether in English for teachers or native language for students. These orientations are not language study and so we need not be concerned with interference from text versus audio input.

Supplementary material has a different benefit. Just as with podcasts not integrated with student needs, the benefit comes from mobility, and, ease of use. Given the long commute times many people endure, podcasts are perfect for train rides. However, the challenge is to make the time useful and the best way is to somehow provide podcasts that are reinforcing the core material being practiced in school or other language training scenario. We do this through a set of podcasts designed to parallel our course *New Dynamic English*. These resources are available at: <<http://www.dyned.com/dyned/japan/htm/podcast.htm>>. These are professionally produced programs prepared originally for broadcast by the Voice of America. Each program directly relates to a unit within the *New Dynamic English* course. These are currently free to access, but, depending upon when you read this article, may have become licensed for use to

clients only. Since awareness and ease of access is critical for the successful use of distributed media such as podcasts, we have built access into the courseware menus itself. This ensures that teachers can quickly refer students to appropriate podcast lessons and that students can find precisely the podcasts appropriate to their current study.

3. Conclusion

To summarize, distributed media in support of language education has always been of value to the most motivated. It is not proven that unmotivated students benefit from technology such as podcasts that require autonomy and self-directed learning, nor is it proven that entertainment approaches that are mostly incomprehensible to learners have any benefits at all. Logically, curricula-appropriate material is useful and the most appropriate podcasts will be those produced to be integrated to the student's course of study and related directly to their study path. Likewise, distributed media such as ScreenCasts can play substantial roles in both teacher training and student orientation. Technology as innovation always invites initial interest. Providing consistent long-term value to our students, however, requires commitment to the principle of the most efficient and effective use of student time and attention and best practice with the technology as tool.