SHORT STORY PODCASTS: EXPERIENCES IN A LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT

This paper considers the role of podcasting in the English language classroom. Podcasts, as presented to many teachers, are an outgrowth of web pages, blogs, iPods or any recent tech phenomena. This paper argues that it is wrong to assume that technology morphs in a linear fashion - blogs to podcasts to You Tube. In fact, blogging to podcasting is not linear - you cannot simply put a blog in audio form and expect the same effect. This may seem like a minor and rather obvious point, but needs emphasis because the instructor quickly realizes that when using technology in a classroom setting they must be able to look at the effects of that particular medium on delivering information to students.

INTRODUCTION

Often instructors are pressured to upgrade their technology simply because it is new without being given the time or resources to critically examine that nature of the medium and its use in a particular academic or cultural context.

In exploring the use of podcasts for university level academic English courses, it became clear to me that there were a few broad types of podcasts for consideration:

1. ESL podcasts. Specialized podcasts designed for the express purpose of learning English. These usually had the benefit of added print and online materials with specific vocabulary and/or grammar points.

2. General Educational podcasts. These include university lectures as well as self-study general topics. Examples include podcasts such as Grammar Girl, which teaches the listener a particular grammar point each week. These types of podcasts had the advantage of set topic, with careful attention to structure and timing. The Grammar Girl podcast provides downloadable transcripts.

3. Narrative podcasts. These were structured podcasts, usually focused on a theme, but using storytelling or structured narrative discussion. They differ from the educational podcasts mainly in style and pacing which serves to engage the audience in a group discussion rather than a one-on-one lecture style. The US based The New Yorker magazine uses this type and this was eventually my choice for classroom use.

4. Conversational podcasts. These are free form discussion and chat style podcasts. The most enjoyable to listen to, in my opinion, but much harder for ESL students to comprehend. The frequent use of slang, jokes, and cultural references make it

adaptable to only the most high level learners in any practical way.

For ESL learners, it is important to distinguish between podcasts used for listening comprehension versus podcasts to be used for content comprehension. For listening comprehension podcasts I chose the Mr. Manners and Mighty Mommy podcasts. Both are part of the same network that produces the popular Grammar Girl podcast and both have the advantage of supplying downloadable transcripts. The Mr. Manners podcast was about 4 minutes long and discussed the use of greetings and salutations. The Mighty Mommy podcast was 6 minutes long and gave instructions on how to change a diaper.

Choosing a content comprehension podcast proved to be more time and labor intensive. New Yorker: Fiction is a monthly podcast produced by the prestigious The New Yorker magazine. Each episode features a contemporary short story writer whose work has been featured in The New Yorker reading aloud another writer's short story that influenced their work. Most of the readers are from the U.S., though the short stories they choose to read have a global range; at least two of which are translations. Typically, each podcast begins with the host and a reader discussing the brief history of the story to be read and why that story will be featured. Next, comes the reading- varying in length from just under 10 minutes to approximately thirty minutes. Before and after the reading there are brief discussions between the reader and the host. I chose John Cheever's "The Reunion" as read by author Richard Ford, published for download May 4, 2007.

In the process of choosing a podcast for comprehension purposes I had several initial criteria. First, it should be relatively short, no longer that fifteen minutes. During the class presentation listening was done in smaller time intervals to allow the students more time to discuss the narrative.

Second, the short story should not contain too many controversial topics nor should it require any particular knowledge from a certain culture. Since, the The New Yorker is a US magazine, it frequently features short stories written and discussed with references to U.S. politics or pop culture. Although learning about culture is necessary in comprehension too much new information tends to detract from the students' ability to follow the narrative.

In listening to a variety of potential podcasts, I discovered a third consideration. This had to do with the structure of the narrative and its complexity. Simply put, I could not have short stories that involved too many changes in time or that contained too many characters. The short story I eventually chose, John Cheever's "The Reunion" is a story of a young boy going to visit his grandmother in upstate New York. On the way, he is to meet his estranged father for a lunch date in New York City. Because the Richard Ford story takes place in one afternoon and involves only two main characters it seemed an ideal choice for classroom use.

USING A FICTION PODCAST IN THE CLASSROOM

I will compare two classes. Both were seminar size (15 students/17 students) meeting once a week for one semester. Both were described as intermediate to advanced English learners. All students were Japanese with Japanese as their first language, and few had any experience living abroad in an English speaking country or using English in a daily living situation. They were from a mix of Japanese public and private high schools.

CLASS A

Class A was intermediate/advanced class with ten students present. First, I asked students if they were familiar with podcasts. Only one student was familiar with the term 'podcast'. So I explained briefly what a podcast was and how to listen to them. Next, I discussed with students what a short story was, and the difference between fiction and non-fiction. Following this brief lecture, I wrote a series of five questions on the board for student comprehension:

1. What is the title of the story?

2. Who is the author of the story?

3. When was it written?

4. What is the name of the magazine?

5. Who will be reading the story?

The first questions were basic comprehension questions easily answered in the introduction and early discussion phase of the podcast. None of the students faced any comprehension difficulties after two listening trials. Several students commented that they enjoyed Richard Ford's voice because they felt his English was clear and easy to understand.

For the next phase of listening, the pre-discussion and story, I decided to change the arrangement of the classroom. The students were in rows, so we created a circle. I mention this because I think the dynamic of classroom arrangement affected the way in which the podcast was perceived. In rows, the podcast was seen as a listening activity much like listening test activities and the students were able to listen and respond to direct questions. The circle arrangement took away the perception of the technology as interloper and made it an organic part of the group. I came to this conclusion post activity as I did not change the class arrangement for group B and later reflected on this difference in student response.

I also gave a list of more complex questions that were asked in the group.

1. What do you think is wrong with the boy's father?

2. Why do you think he has not seen his father for a long time?

3. Do you think this is a happy story or a sad story? Why or why not?

4. How do you feel about Richard Ford as the reader? Do you clearly understand his voice? Do you enjoy his voice, why or why not?

After listening to the podcast twice, most of the students were able to understand the basic storyline and give responses. Questions 3 & 4 proved easier for the students to answer and immediate responses were given. Richard Ford's voice was positively received and one student openly admitted that she decide it was a sad story by the tone of Mr. Ford's voice even though she wasn't sure she understood all the English words. Questions 1 & 2 received slower responses; this was perhaps due to some misunderstanding of my phrasing. Three (3) students agreed that the father had a drinking problem; one (1) student thought that the boy did not like his father. Given more time, and advance preparation, I would like to solicit formal written responses as it would give students more time to reflect on the listening exercise.

CLASS B

Class B was an upper/lower intermediate mixed class with fifteen (15) students present. Because this class had a wider range of student abilities and temperaments, the podcast listening activity was done after a diagnostic exercise at the beginning of the class. As in Class A, students were given the first set of response questions and asked to listen and write their answers in a notebook. I quickly realized that it took three listening trials for a sizable portion of the class to grasp the concrete answers. Vocabulary ability seemed to be the largest obstacle: only one student knew the meaning of the word, 'reunion' and this was distracting to students who did not know. After reviewing their answers, it was necessary to

discuss some terminology-'reunion' as well as place indicators - Grand Central Station, Upstate New York. At the end of the activity, I again asked students how they felt about today's listening, abandoning the structured questions for open- ended commentary. Again, Richard Ford's voice was positively received; one student said he liked the voice though he was not sure he understood the story. Much like Class A, a student mentioned that Mr. Ford's voice sounded like a 'sad' story-once again emphasizing the importance of presentation and style as an important indicator for comprehension of narrative.

DISCUSSION

In comparing Class A and B I was able to look more carefully at my choice of podcasts and how to use them. Though the podcast itself was the same; students' abilities required that I re-evaluate the goals of comprehension depending on the group of students. I also feel confident that classroom dynamics played an important role. Upon reflection, it was obvious that group A had several important advantages beyond the diagnostic English skills. The group was slightly smaller, the class seating arrangement more intimate, and familiarity with New York City (rather real or imagined) drew in a more receptive audience. By contrast, Class B need far more background information to make the story enjoyable and approached it as a diagnostic testing activity rather than as an engaging narrative.

Since so many current listening activities are developed as diagnostic tools rather than engaged narratives, this needs to be a concern of education in developing materials. A podcast that works most effectively in a classroom setting in not necessarily designed as a diagnostic activity. It seems to be that a concentration on narrative structure and presentation (voice and tone of the reader) will engage student interest more. Though more labor intensive, the value

lies in using the technology as an important medium itself, rather than just another fancier version of a listening tape.

MAKING A PODCAST AND STUDENT SELF-ASSESSMENT

What is the difference between creating a podcast and making a speech? Should there be a distinction and how is this relevant to language teaching? In the previous section, I discussed the complexity in determining which podcasts to use and student response to those podcasts. Now I will look at a second class activity, in which students were instructed to make a podcast.

The second use of podcast related software in the classroom concerns the ease of creating a podcast as a method of student self-assessment. Students from Class A and Class B as described above were asked to create a 3-5 minute podcast for audio recording. Both classes were given the same instructions. I provided a list of several topics and a time limit. The topics were on three broad themes: (1) instructions on a hobby, (2) advice for work or study or (3) a folktale translated into English. Students were allowed to work individually or in pairs. I did not, however, dictate format. This was intentional. I was interested in discovering how the students interpreted a 'podcast' and how they reacted to being recorded. Some students focused on concrete topics such as 'how to play the guitar' and 'the proper use of chopsticks'. About half of the students chose to retell a Japanese folktale in English.

The second step of the project was to have students' listen to and critique other podcasts. To this end, students were assigned to listen to one other podcast in a short session and write their own critique of pronunciation, comprehension, and delivery. The critique was part of their grade; and my separate assessment of the students was based on my own

requirements-not the student critique itself. This was made clear to students who worried about harsh assessment from classmates.

PROJECT RESULTS OVERVIEW

Immediately, there was a gap between those who viewed a podcast as a speech and those who viewed a podcast as a more full narrative form requiring individual creativity. For example, most students wrote a speech about a topic, typed it, and read directly from their paper. There were some subtle but noticeable differences in students who chose the folktales. Like the first set, students mainly read from their papers…but the addition of actual narrative story meant that a few enterprising students attempted to create distinct character voices. One pair created an audio drama with characters and a plot line; attempting to make full, creative use of their understanding of the podcasts they heard.

STUDENT CRITIQUES

The second part of the Listening Project included student critiques of their classmates' work. Students were required to listen to one anonymous recording and answer the following set of questions:

1. What was the main theme of this recording?
2. What are two or three things you enjoyed about this recording?
3. What are two things the student(s) can do to improve their recording?
4. What did you like and/or dislike about the listening project?
5. What are some suggestions you have for improving Listening class?

The student critiques of each other were varied. Only about three students in total could give solid feedback about their fellow classmates. Most students comments were along the lines of –"it's too fast", or "it's not clear". The feedback questions with

the longer responses- questions 4 & 5-were directed to the instructor concerning how they felt about creating podcasts. Students appear to have a real weakness in giving feedback. Most students *did* complete all questions on the critique worksheet and made an attempt to answer.

My current concern is making students' podcast audio file available for their own practice and use. Though I told students that they were welcome to copies of their own recordings, only one student did so. A few students were adamant that they did not want to hear their voices. I think that allowing students to have a series of voice recordings, over a period of time, could prove beneficial in helping them to chart their own progress.

CONCLUSION

Selecting and using podcasts and its accompanying technology in the classroom provided me with valuable insight into how students view English language usage as well as how students' digest English language information. The New Yorker: Fiction podcast gave me the opportunity to introduce English in a narrative form. It is necessary for students to view their acquired language skills as an active, vibrant form of communication rather than just and information gathering medium-which is too often the case. The podcast, by providing narrative and conversational pieces to language instruction, helps to bridge that gap. Carefully chosen podcasts come to life as a separate artistic medium distinctly different from a listening exercise. The case studies provided in this paper provide a starting point for integrating these uses in the classroom.

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