

What are more effective in English classrooms: textbooks or podcasts?

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Abstract. In the 21st century it has become clear that more and more language-learning pedagogical materials have begun to shift to a digital mobile-access format and away from being a textbook and classroom based one. High quality language-learning podcasts can provide a cheap, beneficial and portable technology that allows learners the freedom to access useful materials whenever and wherever convenient – especially through smartphones. However, despite the low cost involved in producing and accessing podcasts, educational institutions still seem reluctant to fully utilise them as an integral part of the language-learning process. This presentation will outline the structure of a comprehensive study that analysed the communicative abilities of 102 university freshmen students undertaking a compulsory English oral communication course. The study was divided into a traditional model that was centred-around a paper textbook and digital model where no textbooks were used and the course was structured around a series of high-quality, pedagogically sound English language podcasts. It was found that students progressed in similar ways during the course, regardless of the pedagogical materials used.

Keywords: podcasts, mobile assisted language learning, authentic materials, smartphones.

1. Introduction

In a comprehensive study, the English communicative abilities of 102 university freshmen at a Japanese university were analysed in detail during one semester. Two instructors each taught two classes; the first being a traditional model which was structured around a textbook, whilst in the other course a digital model was

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implemented which utilised high-quality, pedagogically strong English language-learning podcasts. Following [Lauer, Selwood, and Enokida \(2016\)](#), a series of communicative language-learning tests were administered at the beginning, middle and end of the semester to assess the student's progress. The experimental model used in this study partially mirrored an influential study published by [Gilmore \(2011\)](#), which concluded that utilising *authentic materials* – which were mostly Internet-based – seemed to be more effective than traditional English-language learning textbooks. Thus, the goal of this study was to confirm [Gilmore's \(2011\)](#) findings by determining which pedagogical materials were more effective in improving students' oral abilities: textbooks or podcasts.

This paper will outline how the study was implemented, state the benefits that can be found through using non-authentic language learning materials, and report on the results of the tests administered.

2. Background

The study attempted to determine if podcasts are more effective than textbooks in improving students' English communicative abilities. Significantly, podcasts can be accessed through mobile digital devices such as smartphones or tablets. The potential of podcasts as a language-learning tool is that pedagogically strong podcasts can provide high-quality 'authentic' materials. As [Bishop, Amankwatia, and Cates \(2008\)](#) explain, "podcasts have the power to focus attention and assist language learners to acquire useful and authentic language" (pp. 467-486).

English Language Teaching (ELT) textbooks, on the other-hand, often provide learners an impoverished or distorted view of the native language ([Gilmore, 2007](#)). The dialogues in textbooks are often centred-around contrived utterances, with the goal often being to illustrate a particular grammar point whilst highlighting frequent, easy to understood but unnatural vocabulary.

Podcasts also have the potential to motivate because they are often published weekly or monthly and so students are provided with information as events unfold, whilst textbooks can often include language that has been specially adapted, thus losing its authenticity whilst often containing information and facts that soon become out-of-date. Another factor that is often undervalued is that most language-learning podcasts are free, so podcasts can offer a more egalitarian method to language-learners as the materials can be accessed free of charge.

The ultimate aim of a language-learning course should be to improve students' language abilities and communicative competence. Traditionally in Japan, ELT textbooks are the go-to *authentic material* used on language-learning courses. Yet, in a prominent study, Gilmore (2011) concluded that students at a university in Japan significantly improved their communicative competence over a ten month period when they used web-based materials compared to a similar group of students who used only textbooks. The authors wanted to evaluate how successful podcasts could be when used as an essential tool in an English communicative course. By using Gilmore's (2011) study as a starting point, they wished to contrast and evaluate the effectiveness of podcasts in comparison with textbooks.

3. Method

Two of the authors – Selwood and Lauer – each taught one podcast-centred course and one textbook-centred course. Each author chose different textbooks and podcasts to be used in the study. The podcasts selected by Selwood were *English News Weekly*, *English News Students*, *BBC Six Minute Podcast* and *BBC The English We Speak*. Lauer chose four different podcasts and these were *Hiroshima University's English Podcast*, *VOA Podcast*, *Daily English Show* and *ECC Podcast*. Selwood selected *English Speak* (Selwood, 2014) as his textbook whilst Lauer chose *Slumdog Millionaire* (Close, 2010). All the materials were selected because of their high pedagogical quality and their usage of authentic language.

Each course lasted for one 15-week-semester and each class was 90 minutes in length and held once-a-week. Both the textbook and podcast courses were compulsory first year English communication classes. The students were assigned to each class depending on their faculty and their university entrance exam score and the TOEIC test (the standard English language test used in Japan – the highest score is 900 points). Lauer's textbook class had an average score of 540/900 whilst his podcast class was 419/900. In contrast Selwood's podcast class was 629/900 whilst his textbook class was 467/900. This meant that each author had a 'weaker' and 'stronger' ability class and so the study could be measured amongst students of differing abilities.

To assess students' progress, three sets of tests were included in the survey – at the beginning, middle and end of the semester. The tests focused on grammar, listening and speaking because according to Canale and Swain (1980), these are the essential parts in measuring and analysing communicative competence. The three tests were:

- **Communicative Vocabulary-Grammar Test.** This measured students' vocabulary and grammar skills. This test contained 49 questions, taken from a standard TOEIC test and the same 49 questions were used in all three tests, albeit with the question order changed from test to test.
- **Communicative Listening Test.** This measured general listening ability through 21 questions taken from a TOEIC practice test. Again the question order was re-arranged for each test.
- **Three Minute Recorded Speaking Test.** For this test students were placed in pairs and for three minutes the students entered into a dialogue recorded using smartphones. The audio was then emailed to their teacher for analysis.

4. Results

The Communicative Vocabulary-Grammar Test results showed only a tiny improvement in both courses. In the textbook classes the average score increased from 69% to 72% whilst the podcast courses showed a tiny increase from 69% to 70%. However, the stand-out result from the study was the improvement in Communicative Listening Test results in both courses. The textbook students improved their listening scores from an average, per student, from 43% to 54%. The podcast students also improved from an average score of 39% to 51% by the end of the semester.

The Three Minute Recorded Speaking Test also showed small improvements in both courses. In the podcast course, each student, on average, increased their word count by 15 words per three minutes. However, in the textbook courses students only increased, on average, by seven words per three minutes.

5. Conclusions

The study found that, disappointingly, there were no differences in which authentic materials were used. The textbook courses worked just as well as the podcast ones. However, there were mitigating factors to why these results occurred. Firstly, the length of the study was only four months. Secondly, each class met just once a week for 90 minutes. Thirdly, the testing method used to assess the project was hindered by using the TOEIC test as this measures listening ability, vocabulary

knowledge and speaking skills. However the test is limited in how it measures students' sociolinguistic abilities, discourse and strategic skills. The authors used this testing method as it had been used in Gilmore's (2011) study as well as being the pre-eminent English language test used in Japanese universities.

In the future, researchers wishing to investigate the merits of podcasts should focus on correcting the problems encountered by the authors on this study, namely expanding the length of time the study runs for.

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