

Town Sketch Podcasting Project: The Northern Ireland Podcasts

TOMITA Kaoru, MORITA Mitsuhiro,
Mark IRWIN, & HONDA Kaoru

Summary

This paper will introduce the *Town Sketch Podcasting* project now under construction. The first series in this project, *The Northern Ireland Podcasts* are evaluated on the basis of data obtained from questionnaires given to Yamagata University students. Its English content is evaluated on the basis of dictation scores and an analysis of the dictated words and phrases. We will conclude that *The Northern Ireland Podcasts* series is appropriate for improving Japanese English learners' language aptitude, especially their listening skills.

Keywords

English, home-made podcasting, language learning

1 Introduction

Both the contemporary and traditional sides of broadcasting can be seen in podcasting. Unlike conventional media like TV or radio, sound and picture files are downloaded from the internet. With only a little technical knowledge, we can enjoy watching and listening to news reports, stories, music, and so on. By subscribing to a podcast series, the materials are automatically downloaded each time a new podcast is uploaded by the series creators. We, thus, need not worry about missing our favorite programs and can also watch or listen to several weeks' programs in one go.

Some observers predicted that newspapers would lose their readership when news articles began to be offered on the web:

The Washington Post, for example, saw its circulation drop four percent, to less than seven hundred thousand in the last year — and lost ad dollars. The Internet has demolished the economics of the industry, allowing people to read free news from many sources, and providing a cheaper platform for classified ads.

Surowiecki (2006)

Newspapers remain, however, a robust business, as Surowiecki (*ibid.*) points out:

Most newspapers have profit margins that dwarf those of the average company; McClatchy's operating margin last year was twenty-eight percent, while ExxonMobil's was around sixteen per cent, and the typical supermarket's is around four per cent. The reach of newspapers remains huge. Daily circulation is around fifty-five million (not including online readers), giving the industry more customers than any other traditional media outlet. And those customers have the kind of demographics that advertisers like; even as circulation has dropped, revenue from print ads has stayed healthy, to the tune of more than forty-seven billion dollars last year. Newspapers are classic cash cows; solidly profitable businesses in a stagnant industry.

Surowiecki (*ibid.*)

Newspapers, in a way, coexist with the internet. In a similar way, radio can be said to coexist with podcasting. Podcasting, however, would appear to have more scope for developing educational materials, although evaluation of their compressed audio sound quality is still underway, (Ashihara, et al., 2007; Kamekawa, 2007; Komori, 2007; Watanabe, 2007). Users can watch, for example, a lecture whenever and wherever they choose (Walton, et al., 2005; Whitehead, et al., 2007).

2 Podcasting as a learning tool

Podcasts produced for the average native speaker will of necessity be somewhat difficult for foreign language learners. Some podcasts, however, might be used successfully in classes provided some kind of assistance is offered by teachers. Although the media sites used by one of the authors might be rather difficult for university students, they are still

stimulating for learners and teachers;

Nature <http://www.nature.com>

BBC <http://www.bbc.co.uk>

CNN <http://www.cnn.com>

Colleges and universities are starting to construct podcasting resources to educate their students and some of these sites have become very popular. Private sites also create podcasting materials, some of which are fairly easy to understand as well as holding a high level of interest. They are available for free and can be used effectively in classes for lively and realistic communicative activities.

3 'Home-made' podcasting

Due to the popularization of the internet, the ordinary person can make known their opinions in public, despite not being famous or a specialist in a particular field. Many homepages and blogs are created by individuals, some of whom report exhaustively on their activities in a way which is interesting and useful for their readers.

Although it is naturally impossible to cover topics pertaining to the more than two hundred countries around the world, our project group was established in order to start a podcasting project entitled *Town Sketch Podcasting* (Morita, et al., 2007). Towns and regions around the world have countless backdrops that can be adapted to *Town Sketch Podcasting*.

The first series in the project is now available on the website coordinated by the Department of Human Sciences and Cultural Studies, Faculty of Literature and Social Sciences, Yamagata University: <http://khtigers.kj.yamagata-u.ac.jp/tsp/>

4 Research 1

4.1 Objective

Here we present reaction to the *Town Sketch Podcasting* project as a whole through an analysis of student feedback.

4.2 Method

4.2.1 Subjects

Ten university students aged between 19 and 22 participated in the research, 1st, 2nd and 3rd years at Yamagata University who took the class taught by one of the authors in the 2006-2007 academic year.

4.2.2 Materials

Ten lessons of *The Northern Ireland Podcasts* series of the *Town Sketch Podcasting* project were used. The duration of each lesson was around two minutes. A sample passage is presented in Appendix A.

4.2.3 Procedure

After all lessons were taught, along with vocabulary exercises and passage summarization, a questionnaire was administered. This questionnaire consisted of 14 questions and included items such as general impressions, level of interest in the topics, difficulty level of the English, quality of sound, quantity of materials, learner motivation and website accessibility issues.

4.3 Results

The questionnaire results are presented in Table 1. Learners' general impressions of *The Northern Ireland Podcasts* are reflected in questions 1 and 6, their interest in its topics in questions 7 and 10, the difficulty level of the English in 2 and 8, the sound quality in 5 and 9, the quantity of materials in 3 and 12, learner motivation in 4 and 11, and website accessibility issues in 13 and 14.

4.4 Discussion

The response to *The Northern Ireland Podcasts* was overwhelmingly positive. The results show above all that learner motivation was heightened through use of these materials. Website accessibility, length of the materials and use of accompanying pictures also elicited favorable responses. The topics also appeared to be very interesting for the learners. The difficulty level may have been a little too high for some learners, but it still remained in the 'challenge zone', and definitely not in the 'surrender zone'. The tempo appears to have been neither too fast nor too slow and the sound quality also appears to

have been very good.

Table 1 Analyses of learner answers (n=10)

Questions	Very much	Somewhat	Not very much
1. I enjoyed studying the podcasts.	8	2	0
2. The English in the podcasts was a challenge for me.	5	5	0
3. The podcasts were too long.	1	4	5
4. I want to learn about different cultures and peoples.	10	0	0
5. The pronunciation in the podcasts was clear.	7	2	1
6. The podcasts were useful.	6	3	1
7. I can remember the topics in the podcasts clearly.	6	4	0
8. I wanted to give up studying the podcasts.	2	3	5
9. The tempo of the podcasts was fast.	3	4	3
10. The topics in the podcasts were difficult.	1	3	6
11. I want to visit the places mentioned in the podcasts.	8	1	1
12. The pictures on the website relating to the podcasts were interesting.	7	3	0
13. Downloading the mp3 files was quick.	8	1	1
14. The homepage menu was user-friendly.	5	5	0

5 Research 2

5.1 Objective

Dictation tests were conducted in order to observe the effect of the tempo and sound quality of *The Northern Ireland Podcasts*.

5.2 Method

5.2.1 Subjects

The same subjects employed in Research 1 also participated in Research 2.

5.2.2 Materials

For sentence dictation purposes, Lesson 5 was used. This lesson was 300 words in length and lasted 123 seconds.

5.2.3 Procedure

The instructor had each subject download Lesson 3 and listen to whole sentences in their own time and write down the words they could understand. It took around 30 minutes for all the subjects to finish writing.

5.3 Results

The mean score of words correctly written down by the ten subjects was 73.0 % ($\sigma=7.9$). This is a fairly high score when compared with those obtained by the same group using different materials which deal with cities around the world. With *The New York City Experience*, which introduces cities for tourists and is written not for foreign language learners but for general native speakers, a much lower score was apparent: mean=63.1%, $\sigma=5.3$ (cf. Appendix B for sample). With *Images of New York City*, edited for foreign language learners and especially written for them, much lower scores are again evident: mean=61.1%, $\sigma=6.7$ (cf. Appendix C for sample).

The speaking speed of the materials is not so different: the speaking rate of *The Northern Ireland Podcasts* in *Town Sketch Podcasting* is 135 wpm (words per minute), which is similar to that of *The New York City Experience* (139 wpm) and that of *Images of New York City* (140 wpm). Readability scores of these materials are also similar.

5.4 Discussion

Features that cause learners to find some words difficult to pick up are the level of the English or its sound quality. Firstly, proper nouns, such as *Giant's Causeway* or *Finn McCool* are difficult to grasp for many learners. These types of words should be presented beforehand or learned after the fact. Secondly, low-frequency words, such as *columns*, *hexagonal* or *volcanic*, are also difficult. These words might be expected to have been learned already but they can be also learned afterwards. Thirdly, some function words are difficult to comprehend for many: words such as, *where*, *the*, *a* and *are* cannot be heard very easily. Fourthly, some function words are often misheard; the word *their* is heard as *a*, *from* is heard as *for me*, *blows* is heard as *blowing*, *activity* is heard as *activities* and *most* is heard as *last*.

Although this last kind of mistake is very subtle in the context of listening comprehension and even if many words are not heard very well because of this type of mishearing, the gist of the sentence should still be comprehensible. To improve listening skills,

however, these kinds of features should be homed in on more as this is a typical mistake learners face when learning English. Some form of intensive training for this type of mishearing should lead the learners to improve their listening skills.

6 Conclusion

As we have been warned by Walts (2007), even the (more) sober-looking empirical studies tend to use data that happen to be available rather than obtained with a specific research question in mind. This holds true of Research 2 in this paper, where we analyze dictations and their sound quality that appeared to cause difficulty for Japanese English learners. This kind of after the fact research, however, is important for evaluating materials under construction.

As we found in our questionnaire results, *The Northern Ireland Podcasts* series was well adjusted to university students. Its speaking speed was not too fast while also containing assimilations that occur in materials read naturally, casually and fast. The balance of speaking speed and assimilation in *The Northern Ireland Podcasts* is very good for foreign language learners.

A score of 73% for correctly dictated words is a fairly encouraging one for learners. When dictation is conducted with materials read carefully, slowly and sometimes unnaturally, a high score is usually obtained, but when dictation is conducted with materials read casually, naturally and sometimes quickly, a low score is usually obtained. Although *The Northern Ireland Podcasts* are read a little bit slower than the other two materials mentioned above, this may not be the only reason that they got higher scores than the others. It appears that lively reading helps learners comprehend sentences and write down words and phrases.

A natural speaking rate of materials is not the only factor giving the impression of speed. The liveliness of the reading is also very important for an impression of speed. Very monotonous reading sometimes gives learners an impression that the materials are read very fast (Tomita, 2000). On the other hand, materials read with a lively intonation tend not to sound too fast because they help learners obtain cues for phrase boundaries. Lively reading usually includes the appropriate amount of co-articulations, natural phenomena which are useful for learners to master.

Besides the sound quality analyzed in this paper, sentence structure and the position of

words in sentences may affect learners' listening comprehension of words, as has been suggested by Otsuka (2005). Furthermore, Otsuka (2007) also points out that differences in English and Japanese sentence structure may affect the dictation scores of Japanese English learners. These structural features should be evaluated in future studies. We intend to create new series in the *Town Sketch Podcasting* project on an individual basis. On the bases of questionnaires, Japanese English learner dictation scores and analyses of dictated words and phrases, content, English quality, arrangements and stylistic usages will be further refinable.

Acknowledgments

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Educational Materials:

- Looking and Listening Images of New York* on cassette tape. Jim Knudsen, et al., 2004.
Tokyo: Nanundo
- The New York City Experiences* in DVD. New York: Electronic Educational Tours, LLC.
- The Northern Ireland, Town Sketch Podcasting*. Yamagata: Faculty of Literature and Social Studies, Yamagata University

Appendix A

Sample passage from *Town Sketch Podcasting*:

Hello, today, we're going to look at one of the most famous sightseeing spots in Northern Ireland — the Giant's Causeway. Located on the wild north coast, where the wind blows in straight from the Arctic, the Giant's Causeway consists of 40,000 hexagonal (six-sided) rock columns. These were created by very strong volcanic activity about 65 million years ago and their large number is believed to be the biggest anywhere in the world.

Although it has been a tourist site for over 200 years, it is only in recent years, of course, that scientists have been able to understand how the rock columns were created. Before that, the local people believed that the rocks, which in many places look like stairs leading from the sea and up the steep cliffs, had been built by a famous giant called Finn McCool. He had made them so that he could walk across the sea to Scotland in order to fight another giant, his enemy Benandonner. Similar rocks, but much smaller in number,

exist on a small Scottish island on the other side of the straits.

Nowadays, the Giant's Causeway receives nearly half a million visitors a year from all over the world and is a UNESCO World Heritage Sight. See you next time.

Appendix B

Sample passage from *The New York City Experience*:

I love New York. The New York. Welcome back. We love ya. Here's to New York. Welcome to New York City, the most exciting diversifying city you've ever visit. No matter how you arrived, whether coming for a vacation, business trip or conventional day trip, this video will help you to plan and hand your visit to the city through maps, suggestions, and sometimes, even cautions to insure your trip is memorable.

We'll help familiarize you with the city's five boroughs, Bronx, Queens, Brooklyn, Staten Island and Manhattan through brief descriptions and exact locations of the more popular historical, cultural and entertainment attractions.

This video is an introduction to New York City, and we'll spend some time discussing all five boroughs but we'll focus and highlight the sights and sounds of Manhattan. Tips on hailing a taxi cab, where to purchase Broadway tickets, go jogging or use the subway and bus systems to travel around the city like a native New Yorker. We have done our best to include as much information as possible. However, please contact our YC Company in New York City convention visitors' bureau located at 8-10 Seventh Avenue between 52nd and 53rd street in Manhattan. Or call our offices, or log on the web site, www-ycvisit.com for any additional information you might need during your stay.

Appendix C

Sample passage from *Images of New York*:

If New York is a city of poetry, it is also a city of great and unusual architecture. This is the Guggenheim Museum. It opened in 1959 and was designed by the most famous of American architects, Frank Lloyd Wright. With its spiral ramp inside, the building itself is as much of an attraction as its paintings, which are mostly by modern masters like Picasso and Kandinsky.

タウンスケッチポッドキャストिंग —— 北アイルランドシリーズ

富田かおる・森田光宏・アーウィン マーク・本多 薫

タウンスケッチポッドキャストिंगプロジェクトの報告及び北アイルランドポッドキャストシリーズの評価を行う。山形大学人文学部授業受講生を対象としたアンケート調査の結果から、内容への関心、動機づけが非常に高いことが明らかとなった。また、英文の長さ、画像、サイトの構成、英文や音声の難易度も好ましいものであった。特に、英文や音声の難易度は、全10課から成る北アイルランドポッドキャストシリーズのうち、第5課を選びディクテーションを行った結果からも、学習者にとって適度なものである事が明らかとなった。