Pros and cons of a class podcast project: Evaluating a classroom innovation

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This article investigates effective ways to run a course devoted to the creation and publishing of student authored podcasts. Data drawn on in this article is based upon the writer's experiences of implementing podcast projects in her own classroom and student feedback. It is argued that podcast projects are beneficial for the development of learners' spoken English skills and consciousness-raising. However, like all educational innovations, particularly those which incorporate technological elements, attention must be paid to the most pedagogically effective ways of incorporating podcasting according to the specific teaching/learning context in question.

　この論文では、学生がポッドキャスト作成を目的とする英語授業のもっとも効果的な実践方法について述べます。この論文で使用されるデータ資料は著者の経験および学生の授業評価に基づくものです。ポッドキャストを作成する教育プロジェクトは学生の口頭英語能力の上達また学生の口頭英語に対する意識を高めることにおいて効果があると思われます。しかし、教育イノベーション論によると、そのイノベーションを導入する教育上の目的をよく理解した上、その教室環境に特定された授業を行う必要があります。このことはポッドキャストのようなテクノロジーを含むイノベーションを導入する場合には特に重要だと思われます。

The recent explosion of podcasting, and online audio and video content in general, has allowed for previously unimaginable opportunities for learners to come in contact with spoken English (cf. Chinnery, 2005). These materials can be used for pedagogical purposes in the classroom and exploited by learners for extensive listening practice outside of class. Moreover, digital recording technologies, which make all of this online content possible, are also being utilized by teachers to make their own listening materials both for use in the classroom and for students' self-study. While we can find many references to the use of emailing, online chatting, blogging, wikis, and moodles for the promotion of learners' writing skills, the use of digital recording technology to develop learners' spoken English skills has

not received the same level of attention. There are many practical reasons for this, such as access to digital recording technology and financial support. It is also true that the editing, publishing, and evaluation of the spoken language is more challenging than dealing with written language. However, it is precisely because digital recording allows us to easily capture, store, manipulate, and reflect upon spoken language that it is extremely beneficial for the teaching and learning of speaking skills. It was with this in mind that I decided to create a spoken English course dedicated to the creation of student podcasts.

The podcast course was initially run for a 3rd year Japanese university class of non-English majors in the second semester of 2005. It was a 13-week long, one semester Oral Communication course where students met once a week for 90 minutes. Nineteen students were enrolled in the course. In the first half of the course, the students were introduced to a range of radio programs which were investigated for generic stage and common linguistic features. This then became a base for the creation of the students' own work. In the second half of the course, the students formed their own groups and decided the type, format, style, and topic of the radio program they would create. They then proceeded to script, edit, rehearse, and finally record their program. The programs were then edited to include background music and sounds and finally uploaded to my website. In the final class of the semester, students participated in a feedback session where they listened to and commented upon each group's program.

The main impetus behind the syllabus change was to stimulate student motivation and concentration and to provide further chances for student contribution and feedback. In the semester previous to the introduction of the course I used a listening comprehension and discussion-based syllabus. While the students enjoyed listening and talking about the topics, I noted that many were often off task and out of the target language. Unlike writing classes, where students are encouraged to edit and further develop their work, the nature of spoken language makes this development difficult to achieve in conversation classes. Students often stop talking once the task has been "finished" rather than trying again in order to polish their work. Concentration issues also seem to be related to this. I hypothesized that the new, fun, and creative process of creating and sharing podcasts may be linked with an increase in student motivation, and as a consequence, improved concentration levels. I also wanted to create more chances for students to contribute personally to the class and to gain feedback on their contribution, as it was deemed that there were not enough opportunities for true learner input in the previous course. I believed that these goals could be achieved through podcasting.

However, despite the apparent congruence between the aims of the syllabus change and the nature of the project, it is difficult to say that the innovation was a complete success. On the one hand, all students participated in the production and recording of the programs and reported that they found the experience to be rewarding. Moreover, each group's program was not only extremely original, creative, and well prepared, but also unique to their own worries and personalities. However, class observations suggest that there was no significant increase in the use of the target

language or improved concentration on tasks. Moreover, the only official chance for feedback on the learners' spoken English was during the last class of the semester. Even though problems became evident throughout the duration of the course, I did not know how to address them effectively without significantly altering the nature of the project work, which was deemed to be potentially interruptive and demotivating. An additional reason was my personal belief in, and perhaps attachment to, the idea of the project. Through a process of reflection and course evaluation I have identified two key issues which seem to be the basis of several problems which arose during the course:

- a failure to adjust the innovation to the particular needs of the teaching/learning context in question, and

- an over reliance on the technology aspect to inspire enthusiasm without properly considering the pedagogical purposes for its incorporation.

In this paper I will discuss how the above points affected the success of the project and how I have addressed these issues in a remodeled version of the course. I believe these issues are relevant for any long-term, group-work, project-based course, especially those which strongly incorporate the use of technology.

Course evaluation—Identifying the constraints

As more teachers engage in professional development, and as acceptance of teacher initiated Action Research projects grow, increasingly more teachers are implementing innovations in their own classrooms. For the purposes of this paper, I define an educational innovation that is designed and implemented by teachers working in their own classrooms in terms of *informed* and *deliberate* change; informed in the sense that the curriculum change is guided by direct experience in the classroom, research, or communication with fellow teaching professionals, and deliberate in that the purpose of the change is to invoke improvement to current classroom practices (Sergeant, 2001, p. 242). However, regardless of how beneficial or relevant we think our proposed changes are, we must remember that we are not free to innovate as we please (Markee, 2001). As Ronald White (1988, p. 113) argues, "decisions about language curriculum rapidly cease to be decisions about ideas and become actions which affect people." This suggests that we must be acutely aware of any possible constraints in the target teaching/learning context which may effect the implementation of our proposed innovation. In the following section I will detail several issues which were identified by the teacher and students in the course under investigation.

Issues related to the students

Within the first month of the course it became evident that there would be issues with the small group work aspect of the project. The majority of students were in the second semester of their 3rd year of university and had just begun job hunting. For several students this involved attending company information sessions and interviews, many of which were held on weekdays and often in the major cities of Tokyo and Osaka, a considerable distance from the institution in question. As a result, a number of students missed classes during the second half of the course, which was allocated to the preparation of their podcasts.

A related issue was student absenteeism due to laziness or irregular lifestyle patterns. Many students, due to work and club commitments or simply through personal choice, would stay awake until three or four in the morning and then sleep until midday, often missing their morning classes. One might conclude that it is the responsibility of students to attend classes on time, regardless of extracurricular commitments. Nonetheless, if half of the students are absent from class at any one time in a project-based course, this will obviously affect their group members and the progress of the project. While this issue was specific to the context in question, it also reveals certain negative aspects of long-term group projects which rely on extensive in-class preparation.

I think there are two ways to evaluate this issue of student absenteeism. One is to position the students as constraints to the success of the innovation. The other is to view this issue as an indication of underlying problems that exist with long-term group projects. Indeed, there were other factors which suggest that the latter approach is the more appropriate way of evaluating this problem.

Issues related to the long-term group work

Student evaluations of courses offer alternative insights into the success or whatnot of a unit of work. Like needs assessment questionnaires, course evaluations are valuable resources for curriculum improvement and design (cf. Rea-Dickins & Germaine, 2001). In the course in question, students were asked to keep a learning diary to record their preparation for and feelings towards the project. As a part of the learning diary, they were asked to write a guided report detailing their experiences during the project

and its usefulness for their English study. The student reports provided valuable insights which supported my own presumptions about the course and also provided new perspectives which have been valuable for the reformulation of the syllabus.

In their reports, all students commented that they enjoyed the project, in particular the opportunity to create something themselves, to be able to hear their own voices, and to have a permanent record of their work during the semester in the form of their recorded podcast program. However, one theme which consistently appeared was a desire for greater interaction and collaboration between all class members—not just group members. Below, I share a selection of student comments, in their original words, to illustrate this point:

> I liked the idea of making a radio program as a project, but the thing I didn't like is we haven't got all together. That was the only problem. (Hiroko)

> If it might be an improper expression, I want to more talk and communicate each person in this class and the teacher. I want some more class plan which allow close contact between class mates and the teacher. (Yukari)

> I want to enjoy English class, but I couldn't enjoy the class as long as I worked alone on the project. There was not communication. I really like the last lesson because we sat around a table and we shared our opinion. I really want to do something like that. (Masanori)

> I could enjoy making radio program!! I want to make more CM [advertisements] which be helped

other group person because recording with another group person is very fun for me. (Ayako)

These student quotes indicate a desire to share and communicate more with classmates at a class and inter-group level and an understanding that this was not possible under the small group project format. This echoes comments made by David Hall (2001, pp. 222-223) about the importance of creating opportunities for "socially validated responses" in the classroom, which facilitate greater chances for student contribution and feedback and thus work to develop a sense of membership in the classroom community. Several students also commented on the overuse of Japanese when negotiating details of the project, especially in groups with students of different English levels. The use of the non-target language among group members in long-term projects has been noted by Robert Debski (2000) who suggests that students often fall back on their native language when they want to perfect the non-language aspects of projects, such as design features.

While end of semester course evaluations provide us with insights into how students perceived the course, they do not allow us to improve the course to meet the needs of current students. In optimum conditions we would be able to identify all potential constraints to an innovation prior to implementation and address these in the design stage. However, in reality, some constraints may not be identifiable until after the implementation of the innovation. This suggests that evaluation of the innovation must occur during the whole life of the innovation, and that the teacher must be able to adapt the innovation as appropriate in light of the constantly emerging teaching/learning situation (Debski, 2000). However, this can be extremely challenging for teachers working alone in their own classrooms. Teacher-innovators are often forced to undertake multiple roles in the implementation of their innovations: syllabus designer, materials developer, and instructor. It is widely argued that the overloading of roles and responsibilities can lead to the failure of innovations and result in *burnout* for the individual teacher involved (Bailey, 1992, p. 259).

However, it is clear that the teacher must always keep the pedagogical purposes of the innovation foremost in mind when introducing changes to the classroom. If these purposes are not being achieved, the innovation should be amended; regardless of any personal attachment or other difficulties which may exist.

Optimal pedagogical and tool effectiveness
In addition to student desire for communication at a class level and addressing student absenteeism, I believe there are several pedagogical reasons for avoiding long-term group projects. One of the original motivations for this course was to get students talking more in the target language and to get them to become more conscious of their spoken English through self-reflection and feedback. However, in retrospect it seems obvious that the nature of the end of semester project did not facilitate this. The focus of the course was the final and only podcast, rather than the process towards it. It thus seems that short, multiple projects with different group formations would better facilitate the purposes behind the innovation.

Furthermore, it is essential to use technology in the classroom in ways which address the students' language and communication needs. If we are using podcasting as a vehicle for pedagogical purposes, then perhaps *final product slickness* should be a secondary concern. Our main concern should be the message the students want to share and interlanguage development. This suggests the greater incorporation of adlibbing rather than purely scripted programs. One may also surmise that increased chances for *broadcasting*—or feedback—is also beneficial for locating areas for improvement.

One technical issue which may arise here is access to recording technology. In the course detailed above, the majority of recordings were made using a computer, microphone, and the free recording software, Audacity. This meant that the technology was in the hands of the teacher and was not freely available to the students. It seems that the most effective approach to incorporating recording as a regular activity in the classroom would be to increase student access to it. Ideally, this would involve acquiring a class kit of decent quality voice recorders, so that groups may record simultaneously and be able to immediately access and evaluate their recordings. Free access to voice recorders outside of classroom time would also be desirable. There are financial factors involved here, which must be considered. However, this would be the ideal environment for similar projects which rely on a recording element.

Learning from *mistakes*

I am currently running a similar class that incorporates the revisions outlined above. In this section I will outline the changes made to the course and the improvements I believe this has lead to. However, I must first note some key structural differences between the two classes. First, the number of students in the present class is half of that of the original class, with only 8 students enrolled in the course. This has made the project much easier to manage and allowed for greater class-level feedback and communication. Second, there seems to have been an improvement in student absenteeism, possibly attributable to the fact that most of the students in the current course have not needed to travel far to attend interviews and seminars for job hunting, and that they are in general more punctual. Thirdly, I was able to acquire a number of good quality voice recorders—enough for one recorder per student. This has allowed me to utilize a range of different activities not possible last year. I believe that these changes, in addition to changes made to the syllabus itself, have contributed to the pedagogical effectiveness of the course.

In this class there are no set groups and no final project. Moreover, recording is used in conjunction with a wider range of classroom activities. All students have the chance to create different types of radio programs, including chat, news, counseling, and review programs, in a variety of group formations, such as individual, pair, small group and whole class. Students have a set amount of time to prepare for each recording, and are able to rerecord until they are satisfied, within the set time frame. After each recording, students are required to listen to the recordings of all class members and comment on content, language, and production elements. This is done in written form for homework, and then orally at the beginning of the next lesson.

Comments made by students during the feedback sessions reflect their enjoyment at making the programs. They also demonstrate the effectiveness of recording for enhancing student awareness of their own and their classmates' spoken language skills. The students independently identify issues with their intonation, pronunciation, and voice production and ask for activities to address these issues. Some examples of student comments include:

> I think the sentences are too monotonous. (Naoki, Miki, Atsuko)

> My voice is small. I want to speak in a bigger voice than now. (Masaki)

> I think the method of pausing and intonation was bad. (Miki)

> The program was not easy to listen to because it was too fast. (Naoki)

> My voice is too low and difficult to hear. I want to try to talk in a higher voice. (Ayumi)

> My pronunciation is not smooth. (Kazuki)

> I think this program is smoother than last week's program. (GaoLai)

The students were also more aware of awkward silences in their programs and used the chance to relisten to recordings outside of class to review self-perceived recording mishaps. For example, Miki reflects on her frustration at not being able to pick up a question asked to her during a whole class recording:

> I couldn't understand the question, "Do you like it?" I heard it as, "Do you like eat?" I thought my turn ended and relaxed my guard. I made a mistake.

I believe these student comments demonstrate the relationship between recording and reviewing recordings for achieving greater levels of concentration and consciousness-raising of spoken speech. Regular podcasting projects offer a more effective way to achieve this.

New activities

In this course I have utilized digital recording and voice recording tools for more than just the creating of student podcasts. These new activities were incorporated in recognition of the support and variation students need when creating their podcasts.

1. Using voice recorders as music player devices in shadowing activities: Many of the latest voice recorders can be used in two modes—as a recorder and as an mp3 player. As they can be used with earphones, this also opens the way for creative listening and pronunciation activities. I decided to try a shadowing activity using the voice recorders after students commented about their "monotonous voices." I chose an appropriate segment of dialogue between two characters from a movie, and then recorded and edited the files so the students could listen to the scene as a whole or their individual character's dialogue line by line. I left enough space after each line for the student to repeat it before replaying or moving on to the next line. Students watched the scene with the visuals first, paying particular

attention to the gestures, facial expressions, and feelings of the characters and how this was expressed in their voices. Students then individually practiced the shadowing activity before rehearsing with their partner and finally recording the scene themselves and comparing it to the original.

2. Out of class recordings: On several occasions when producing news programs, I allowed students to take voice recorders home in order to interview friends and family members. The students decided which segments they wanted to include and these were edited into their news programs. The students enjoyed the opportunity to use English creatively and to make "more authentic" programs.

3. Immediate student-generated listening activities: Voice recorders allow for the immediate creation and sharing of student-authored listening activities. Students recorded their program individually or in pairs and then swapped with a classmate. Once they had sufficiently understood their partners' program, the students then regrouped to discuss the topic. I have used this format in other classes for listening comprehension style activities with equal success.

Conclusion

In this paper I reported on a podcast project class and how it has been improved in light of teacher and student reflections on the original course. As there were several differences between the two classes examined—differences in student numbers, the extent of absenteeism, and the availability of recording devices—it is difficult to precisely account for what was behind the improvements. However, it seems obvious that using audio recording—in this case through the

vehicle of podcasting—for specific pedagogical purposes is a key point. Warschauer (1996) astutely notes, "The effectiveness of CALL cannot reside in the medium itself but only in how it is put to use." Thus, we would be mistaken to incorporate a technological innovation in the classroom only on the presumption that its newness or novelty factor may promote student motivation and classroom participation. This does not mean that there is no place for slick student podcast productions in the classroom; just that such productions should be used in conjunction with regular, perhaps rougher, pedagogically motivated recordings.

Another factor was the shift from one long-term project to the creation of several short-term projects and the multiple group formations employed in the revised syllabus. Comments from current students suggest that multiple chances to record, and thus multiple chances to receive feedback, is related to an increased level of consciousness towards spoken speech performance. Furthermore, the fact that students are rerecording their programs at their own initiative suggests that recording may be linked to higher concentration levels. The next step is to test these observations in an experimental setting. Furthermore, it would be desirable for the students' podcasts to be heard by a wider audience, and perhaps begin a podcast relay between students in different regions of the world.

I also suggested the importance of continual course evaluation—drawing from both teacher reflections and student feedback—*throughout* the duration of the course, and the necessity of acting upon these evaluations. It is crucial to not only identify the potential constraints of the teaching/learning context when introducing innovations, but

to work with these constraints and best adapt the innovation to the particular needs of the class in question. The tools we choose to use are ultimately only as good as the way we choose to use them. This should match our pedagogical aims and the needs of the specific classroom context in which we are working.

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