Hertz und Pixel: Creative Podcasting With Adult Learners of German for a Japan-Wide Competition

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As 2011 marked the 150th anniversary of diplomatic relations between Germany and Japan, an audio and video competition (*Hertz und Pixel*) for Japanese learners of German was launched. For this competition two groups of mature learners at a private language school in Tokyo produced audio contributions in the form of podcasts. This article recounts the production process of one of these groups, from planning phase to recording and editing, and then through to the final products, which can also be found as podcasts online: http://radio-onichi.podspot.de/

日独交流150周年という記念の年であった2011年、日本のドイツ語学習者のためにオーディオ・ビデオコンテスト（Hertz & Pixel）が開催された。このコンテストのために、東京にある語学学校でドイツ語を学ぶ壮年学習者の2グループが、ポッドキャストを使ったオーディオ作品を作った。本稿では、これら2グループのうちの1つのグループと行なった作業が、計画段階からレコーディング、編集を経てどのように最終作品に至ったかを紹介していく。作品はhttp://radio-onichi.podspot.de/で試聴可能である。

THE YEAR 2011 marked the 150th anniversary of German-Japanese diplomatic relations. Throughout the year a large number of events in Germany and all over Japan celebrated that anniversary and the friendship between the two cultures and peoples. In order to support and celebrate the learning of the German language in Japan, an audio and video competition for Japanese learners (*Hertz und Pixel*) was initiated. Entries were required to have some kind of reference to the letter *D*, allowing for a large number of potential topics. There were four categories: fictional audio, audio documentary, fictional video, and video documentary. Submissions could be produced by anyone learning the German language in Japan. Students at universities and some language schools were encouraged to produce their very own audio and video contributions. The competition website for further reference is to be found at http://www.hertzundpixel.net/tiki-index.php (German and Japanese only).

At a private foreign language school in Tokyo, Japan, students of two German classes produced podcasts that were submitted to the *Hertz und Pixel* competition. This paper will look at only one of these groups in detail. The average age of the eight participating students was late 50s and their language competency level was approximately B1-B2 (intermediate to upper intermediate) level of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR).

The process of producing the podcasts consisted of planning, recording, and editing. The learners involved in this study opted for presenting their podcasting topics in different forms of the German language—drama and poetry.

Note that the terms *audio* and *podcast* are used interchangeably in this paper.

Audio and Podcast Production as Language Learning Tools

Offering speaking opportunities to students can be a big challenge for a language teacher, especially in an environment where the target language (TL) is not frequently used. With the growing use of the Internet there exists no shortage of materials online that learners may passively engage with. Furthermore, through Skype and other audio or video applications and services there are also chances to practice spoken language actively, but students need to (a) be aware of them, (b) know how to use them, (c) choose applications they enjoy the most, and (d) keep using them. Egbert (2011) demonstrated why a teacher's "knowledge and understanding of engagement" (p. 131) with technology plays a key role in this. Some students are simply not aware of such learning technologies or they do not feel technology-savvy enough. According to White (2011), even very technology-savvy learners may reject applications that are not interactive enough (p. 140f).

Furthermore, Traxler (2008) stated that when using technology for supporting speaking didactics, methodology and the activity types selected are particularly important. Podcasting is an active and productive means of practicing speaking skills but it is also very closely linked with motivational aspects of learning. Cane and Cashmore (2008) found that producing a podcast keeps motivation high and entices students even further, and that the chosen speaking tasks are ideally engaging, meaningful,

fun, or possibly all of these. Technology and audio in particular offer the chance to give students a range of possibilities to practise their language skills and motivates them by the engaging use of new media (Egbert, 2011). This can also be true when students use podcasting on their own or at least away from the institution in a kind of distance learning context, as Hunke (2011) demonstrated in his study on using podcasts as reflective tools on compulsory stays abroad. Bollinger (2011) asserted that Japanese language students may be particularly reluctant to use the TL a lot and be uninhibited in class. However, in her video-facilitated speaking project she found that such inhibitions could be overcome quite successfully by recording classroom conversations on video.

According to Falout (2011) and Yaden (2007), the use of technology has to have a sound basis and foundation in the instructor's plan but it should not be the foremost consideration. "Rather, it's what we do with technology that is focal" (Egbert, 2011, p. 131). It ought to become clear to the students from the start that technology is a mere facilitator, a tool to very practically show them some of their potential in using the TL—which they may or may not be aware of (Falout, 2011).

> Using technologies just for the sake of using them, and thus transcribing the learning material from one medium to another, is not a matter of bad vs. good use, but an inappropriate, and if you want, an ugly, use (misuse) of learning technologies. (Dror, 2008, p. 222)

Podcasts offer a high degree of control over a speaking situation as they can be planned beforehand and edited after recording by the students themselves. "What is truly new is that learner experience and contribution is in the middle of the innovation, for the first time. And it is only just beginning" (Salmon, 2009, p. 172). Furthermore, two or more people can produce podcasts, providing an interactive environment. Additionally,

interactions with others can be achieved through the upload of podcasts to podcasting platforms, allowing for comments from them. If used in class, single podcasts can be discussed directly, potentially providing the producer(s) with constructive criticism, an element of collaborative learning (Doi & Peters, 2012). Podcasting consequently is a tool that enables language learners to produce their own audio and use the spoken TL at a number of different levels. Producing pieces of audio allows for employing task-based learning approaches (TBLA), but it is also a suitable tool for scaffolded and guided teaching or learning methods like PPP (presentation, practice, production) and others (Sato, 2011).

Preparing the Podcasts

Preparing Content

First, the students compiled a list of words beginning with the letter *D* as a homework task (see words in Appendix B). The focus was on German but words from other languages as well as names were not excluded. The resulting vocabulary list of 75 words was used to get a feel for both the meaning and the rhythmic characteristics of the words collected. Based on the *D* word list, students were then given the task of producing *haiku* (a traditional Japanese poetic form) in German in pairs. The haiku format followed the traditional rules of five syllables in the first line, seven in the second, and five in the third line. The haiku did not have to contain exclusively *D* words and did not have to be grammatically correct German. Most students still aimed at using only words from the list and very often succeeded. The focus of this task was on playful creative activities to practically demonstrate to students what could be done with fairly little material and their own language ability.

Students often did not find it easy to assess the number of syllables, especially in polysyllabic words. This issue was addressed by having the instructor utter a problematic word slowly and having the student repeat it. Often, this process had to be repeated several times until it became clear to the student how many syllables the word in question had. Sometimes the student was instead asked to write down the word. The syllables were then counted manually by dividing the word into what the student deemed to be the syllables. This process usually had to be repeated fewer times than the saying-repeating exercise described earlier.

The focus of the haiku exercise was initially not so much on meaning. Nevertheless, it was not easy to steer students away from composing near perfect bits of text that were grammatically, syntactically, and semantically correct. Some students happily took up the opportunity to try out something new. Others attempted to stick very closely to the format of the traditional Japanese haiku in which the theme always covers seasons or seasonal change (a *kigo*).

With a few trial runs of composing scripts for audio content completed, students were asked to read their pieces to each other in small groups. Research has shown that pair and group work are among the most useful types of activities for students (Ockert, 2011). When the students had become comfortable with presenting their own pieces of writing, they were taken aside in pairs or small groups to make some very brief first recordings. These recordings were made to get students more relaxed with the recording device being used. These first recordings were not submitted as contributions to the competition, since they were made only to familiarise students with being recorded. More compositional and detailed language work was necessary to produce pieces for the competition.

Some students seemed to like playing with the meaning and rhythmic qualities of the words from the *D* list. They started producing poems, not in *haiku* format, but completely unshackled pieces of poetry (see Appendix C). They explored the pos-

sibilities of combinations of words, and also the way German articles and pronouns—many starting with the letter D—may be used or omitted. In fact, the exercise became an exploratory session on the use of the definite article vs. demonstrative pronoun vs. zero article in German—an unexpected side benefit.

The following week the students performed the haiku or poems once more in front of the entire group. They decided by vote their favourite haiku or poems, resulting in the selection of two haiku and two poems. A feedback round followed in which both the group and the instructor practiced giving constructive feedback. Students would first give praise and positive feedback and then move on to things that perhaps might be improved. Students were asked to give particular feedback on aspects of rhythm, stress, intonation, and pronunciation. Students were not accustomed to giving feedback on others' performances and a certain degree of guidance by the instructor was therefore necessary.

Planning Phase for the Submissions

Following the feedback session, the students each selected five words from the *D* list. Then groups of two or three picked seven to nine *D* words out of these and had to come up with a format that (loosely) tied them together. Any format was acceptable. One group decided to stick with the haiku or poem format whereas two groups developed a storyline based on a dialogue script they themselves wrote and performed as a drama in their podcasts. Throughout this exercise students were reminded to use the TL as much as possible. Another requirement was that the audios also feature all participants in the group. Students were also asked not to attempt to write out entire sentences for their scripts.

After finishing a draft of the story lines, students practiced the dialogues in trial runs among themselves in groups. The instructor listened to the groups' performances individually and gave some advice regarding issues of basic intelligibility. During this time the other groups continued working on their projects. Once every group had received feedback, the first recording took place. Students were encouraged not to read and rather to use keyword prompts as much as possible. This was, however, only successful with two students. Most insisted on reading aloud from their written scripts. Nonetheless, a certain degree of spontaneity and on-the-spot variation was done.

When all contributions had been recorded, the entire group listened to the pieces of audio and again gave constructive feedback. The feedback and planning phases were largely conducted through the medium of the TL.

Recording and Editing

All in all, the process of producing the contributions for the competition took around 6 hours spread over 6 weeks. One hour was spent on the initial haiku composing exercise, 2 hours on planning (i.e., further developing the haiku and poems in the case of one group, and developing the story lines in the case of the other groups), 2 hours on recording, and 1 hour on editing. On average three recording sessions were deemed necessary by the students themselves. Students spent considerable time and effort on fine-tuning various aspects of their contributions. Mostly, they focused their attention on bettering their pronunciation and stress during the podcasts.

In particular, the two students who decided to pursue a poetry contribution became increasingly well versed in performing their self-written pieces with very carefully tuned prosodic characteristics. At later stages the students in the other groups also became more concerned with aspects of prosody and finetuning their use of vocabulary.

The editing had to happen exclusively in class, as none of the students felt confident enough to use editing software at home on their own computers. Editing consisted of two parts. First, hesitations, pauses, and other minor mistakes that the students found undesirable were edited out. Second, the students chose background music from royalty-free sound files the instructor had compiled. Individual students also provided certain atmospheric sound pieces they had found online. The instructor then edited in the chosen pieces of music. Outside class, the instructor did one final edit of all contributions. However, before they were sent off for submission the group listened once again to all contributions and some final adjustments were made on the spot, based on student feedback.

The Contributions to the Competition

In the end the group submitted three pieces of audio to the *Hertz und Pixel* competition by the end of July 2011 (see Appendices 2 and 3). The submissions consisted of two fictional dialogue pieces featuring many of the *D* words and one contribution featuring a number of self-written haiku and poems. The two dialogue pieces both dealt with conflict situations. In one of the productions two female co-workers let off steam about the behaviour of their male boss. The third student involved produced a contemplative introduction on the issue of male bosses in today's work life from a female perspective. In the other production, a daughter and mother were in conflict about the mother's eating habits and alleged obesity. The third student, in the role of a rather strict old-school doctor, intervened and attempted to win over the mother to his medical views and the measures suggested. The poetry contribution featured a number of topics. Among other things, the successes of *Nadeshiko Japan*—the Japanese women's national soccer team who became world champions in 2011—were contemplated and one poem even featured a translation and adaptation into German of the contemporary

Japanese expression肉食女子草食男子 (*niku shoku joshi, sou shoku danshi* or meat-eating female, grass-eating male).

Discussion

In this project, a group of mature Japanese learners of German were enthusiastic enough to produce and contribute pieces of audio to a nation-wide audio and video contest. They decided on the form and topic of the contributions themselves, which resulted in one poetry submission and two drama submissions. Students spent most of the time during the production process on planning and recording. They engaged in a lively and active fashion in working on a format they had no or very little previous experience with.

Through participating in the *Hertz und Pixel* competition and creating the podcasts, the students developed their own creative potential in oral use of the TL to a considerable extent. As Dörnyei (2009) put it, fostering and making use of creativity in a foreign language are useful tools to improve in the TL. In the current project, students exceeded their own expectations in terms of creativity and the ideas and topics they themselves came up with. They were particularly surprised with the professional character and quality of the pieces they could produce on their own.

In regular classes the amount of speaking time for each student and the type of utterances made are often limited. In the process of creating and producing the podcasts, students were able to use German in a number of different ways. They managed to work on their pronunciation and prosody particularly, in order to convey some very emotional scenarios as convincingly as possible. And they also grew more confident with their own speaking abilities, something they expressed openly after the project.

As discussed above, ideally the use of technology should as much as possible mirror the students' desire to communicate a particular content of their own choosing (Rösler, 2008). The cur-

rent project was an indication of how creative writing and audio production processes can fulfil that, at least to some degree. Students wrote about their own topics and chose the format they deemed most appropriate to express their thoughts.

In their study of students producing podcasts for their own learning and for dissemination to other students, Cane & Cashmore (2009) concluded that podcasts supported multiple forms of interactions among students. Hunke (2010) also demonstrated that interaction with podcasts may even take place across country boundaries. In the current project such interactions took place on two levels. Firstly, the students interacted in their large group about their podcasts in the feedback sessions. Secondly, the forum of the competition allowed a much wider audience access to their contributions.

Conclusion

The project was able to demonstrate that podcasts can be a powerful technological tool in second language education. In particular, when TBLA is coupled with an extrinsic incentive like the competition, student motivation and diligence levels are very high. As Rösler (2008) said, it is the question whether students actually have something they want to communicate that matters the most. Egbert (2011) maintained that technology can facilitate, but never replace, good teaching, pedagogy, and didactics, helping to engage students in language and content learning. In the project it was possible to achieve that kind of engagement using technology in order to increase the amount of spoken interaction in class. The highly dedicated manner displayed by the students also suggested that something had happened in terms of their attitudes towards speaking and their abilities to use the TL to interact verbally.

In the end the project was a particular success because the poetry contribution won the special Issey Ōgata prize for audio submissions. It was uplifting and heartening for the students and the instructor to see their hard work and efforts pay off and be recognized in such a fashion. The majority of other contributions submitted to the jury had been produced by university students. Younger students almost inevitably have the advantage of being closer to and more in tune with technology. That more mature learners could produce something that was recognised at the national level acknowledged the hard work they put into their contributions.

If the project were to be repeated, more time ought to be devoted to students' fluency rather than accuracy. More spontaneous and semi-spontaneous speech should be encouraged and perhaps made obligatory. If students could be involved more actively in the editing, that would also be an achievement. However, despite certain shortcomings, it was a rewarding experience for all people involved.

Acknowledgements

Bio Data

Morten Hunke was educated in Germany, Ireland, and Sweden. Before coming to Japan he worked in England and Germany. For many years he has been using audio applications with students. <mortenisverige@yahoo.se>

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Appendix A.

Student-Produced Audio Podcasts

Examples of student-produced audio/podcasts may be found at
(websites only in German):

- http://reflektiv-podcasten.podspot.de/
- http://lupe.podspot.de/
- http://kernsprache.podspot.de/
- http://deutschsichtig.podspot.de/

Appendix B.

List of D Words Compiled by Students Taking Part in the Hertz und Pixel Competition

denken	durchhalten	Dampf	Deck	durchsetzt
danken	Dienst	dumm	Döner	Dose
Damen	dunkel	Druck	drei	Diamant
dominieren	dämonisch	Dialekt	doppeln	Dekoration
Dämlack	Defizit	Detail	doppeltgemoppelt	Despot
Demel	Deal	Demut	Durchgang	doch
damals	Dilemma	Detektiv	drucken	Dom
deutsch	dienen	Deutschland	drücken	DNA
Dirigent	Doktor	Donnerwetter	Datum	DIY
Dackel	Dichter	Dokument	deep	Delfin
demonstrieren	Dialog	Dekadenz	do	datieren
Demokratie	Dosenbier	Dunkin Donuts	dog	deeskalieren
Diktatur	Dessert	dolce	Daumen	Donau
DDR	diet	Demolierung	Debatte	dick
dinner	Diät	DVD	diskutieren	deutlich

Appendix C.

Examples of Story Outlines

1. Dr. Streng

   Sprecher: Dr. Streng, übergewichtige Mutter, besorgte Tochter

   Plan: Tochter kann die Esssucht der Mutter nicht kontrollieren. Dr. Streng kommt zur Hilfe. Relativ glückliches Ende, aber Mutter bleibt uneinsichtig.

   [1. Doctor Strict

   Speakers: Doctor Strict, overweight mother, concerned daughter

   Outline: The daughter is unable to keep the mother's addiction to food in check. Doctor Strict aids her. A relatively happy ending follows, but the mother remains stubborn).]

2. Der Chef

   Sprecher: Sprecherin (Einführung Thema/Problematik), zwei Kolleginnen am Mittagstisch

   Struktur: Sprecherin leitet Thema ein und schließt es ab; die zwei Kolleginnen beschweren sich über frauenfeindliches Verhalten des Chefs

   [2. The Boss

   Speakers: Announcer (introduction to topic/context), two female colleagues having lunch together

   Structural outline: The announcer introduces the broad topic and wraps it up at the end; the two colleagues complain about the misogynist behaviour of their boss.]

Appendix D.

Examples of Haiku and Poems Produced:

Zur Dämmerstunde
das Dampfschiff auf der Donau
danach Dunkelheit

[At dusk
The steamboat on the Danube
Thereafter darkness]

Dämon und Deubel
was ist diabolischer
Dachs oder Dämlack

[Demon and devil
Which is more diabolical
Badger or fool]

Damenfußball Nadeshiko
Weltmeisterschaft in Deutschland
durchhalten, dominieren

[Women's football/soccer Nadeshiko
World Cup in Germany
Prevailing, dominating]

Drache rettet arme Dame,
im Dunkeln fällt sie durch das Dach,
dort erscheint der Drache,
sie dankt dem Drachen

[Dragon rescues unfortunate lady
   In the darkness she falls through the roof
   There the dragon appears
   She thanks the dragon]