

Student-Produced Podcasts for Pronunciation Development

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As a way of promoting learner-centered autonomous learning, 3 university educators employed a task-based approach to developing pronunciation skills through student-produced podcasts. This paper is a practical reflection on teaching practice and examines in detail the potential value of implementing student-produced podcasts to teach pronunciation. The amount of time instructors can dedicate to the direct teaching of pronunciation is limited in integrated skills courses where communicative interaction is the primary goal. Through this paper, we hope teachers will be encouraged to try student-produced podcasts in their classrooms across various contexts.

学習者による主体的な学習を向上させる手段として、3人の大学教員は、学生自ら作成したポッドキャストを使用してその発音技能を向上させるというタスクを基礎とした教授法を採用した。本論は、現実の教授活動を反映したもので、学生が作成したポッドキャストが持つ発音教育における可能性について詳細に検証する。相互疎通を最大の目標とする統合的な技能コースでは、各教員が直接発音を指導できる時間には制限があるのが実情だ。本論を基に、分野を問わず、各教員がその授業の中で学生の作成したポッドキャストの使用を試みて頂くことを私たちは希望する。

Pronunciation is an important, but often controversial, aspect of language teaching and learning. One of the controversies highlighted in the literature is the question of which features of pronunciation to prioritize in classroom instruction. Wong (1987) argued that teaching suprasegmental features should be emphasized because of their importance in communication. Suprasegmental or prosodic features refer to pronunciation features that occur across larger sound units, such as syllables and words. Suprasegmental features include, but are not limited to, such things as rhythm, intonation, linking of sounds, speech rate, pausing, and other phenomena that occur in pronunciation. On the other hand, some researchers have stressed segmental features, which Avery and Ehrlich (1992) defined as the individual sounds (vowels and consonants) of a language. As more people learn English as a foreign language, communicating with native English speakers is decreasing and so is the idea that L2 learners must sound like native English speakers. With this in mind, Jenkins (2001) developed the English as a Lingua Franca Core. This list of pronunciation features specifies that segmental features with a high functional load should take precedent for spoken interaction between nonnative speakers for intelligibility, with less emphasis on suprasegmental features.

In a study by Munro and Derwing (1999), intelligibility was defined as the actual degree to which the speaker's message is understood by the listener, whereas comprehensibility is the ease of interpretation as perceived by the listener. The researchers concluded that pronunciation instruction should not focus on accent reduction, but rather only on intelligibility and comprehensibility because these features, not accent, appear to interfere with listeners' understanding.

Celce-Murcia, Brinton, Goodwin, and Griner (2010) reported that pronunciation instruction was moving in the direction of a more balanced view regarding the importance of segmental and suprasegmental features. Goodwin (2014) also noted these features are essentially an interdependent system and should therefore both be taught. In our opinion, the amount of time an instructor will focus on teaching the various features of pronunciation is dependent in part on the particular needs of students and contexts of instruction.

Rode, Hayashi, & Holland: *Student-Produced Podcasts for Pronunciation Development*

Although the integrated skills textbooks we used for our classroom instruction contain some sections on pronunciation, we wanted a class project that would allow for more explicit instruction of pronunciation, but also encourage independent pronunciation study and training on the part of the students. We determined that such a pronunciation project should integrate the four skills of speaking, listening, reading, and writing, in alignment with the course and program goals. Student-produced podcasts came to mind immediately because we had already done this four-skills task-based project in previous years when we had noticed several issues in students' pronunciation. Creating student podcasts involves having them research a topic of interest based on a thematic unit in their course, write an original script, practice reading the script with attention to pronunciation, and finally, record their script (for a detailed discussion of how to implement this task-based project in your own teaching context, see Holland, Hayashi, & Rode, 2017).

For this project, we decided to focus on the *s* (/s/ or /z/) sound, or lack thereof, in students' production of English. When we evaluated our students' written work, the final *s* of words was often missing. Because the production of *s* occurs in a variety of grammatical contexts, such as the third person singular present inflection, the plurals of nouns, and possessive forms, these would provide many opportunities for student production regardless of student proficiency levels. Furthermore, our students have a general perception that pronunciation is a critical factor in communication. Thus, student-produced podcasts were deemed an engaging method to develop pronunciation.

Our Approach to Task-Based Pronunciation Instruction

The Teaching Contexts

The students were 2nd-year students at two universities in Japan. The total number of students was 53. At University A, there were two classes of students in the department of English, consisting of 12 students each. These two classes were an English integrated four-skills course with an emphasis on communication. The students in the first class were approximately a CEFR A2+ level, while the students in the second class were a CEFR B1 level. At University B, there was one class of 29 students in the department of English literature with an average level of CEFR B1. This class was an oral English class.

Setting up the Project

Although the content of the classes at the two universities varied, all three of us share a common approach to EFL teaching—task-based language teaching (TBLT). More

specifically, we used multiple communicative tasks throughout a semester to motivate students and assess their abilities in a learner-centered environment.

Previously, we had all worked together in the same university and had co-created a podcast task in which students researched, wrote, practiced, and recorded presentations on particular topics related to the course content. Because TBLT is already a part of our approach and curriculum, investigating the effectiveness of particular tasks, such as podcasts, seemed a reasonable endeavor.

To investigate whether or not podcasts are a viable tool for improving pronunciation within integrated skills classes, we took an action-based research approach. We decided on the following four stages of instruction over a semester: (a) select and adapt an initial reading-aloud exercise and record students to evaluate students' ability to pronounce the final *-s* sounds, (b) conduct instructional activities to raise students' awareness of word final *-s* environments, (c) have students create and record podcasts, and (d) record the initial reading exercise once again to see if there was an improvement. In total, this project was carried out over seven classes during the term, only three classes of which required the entire 90 minutes of class time.

Stage One: Lesson One—Getting the Project Started

At the beginning of the semester, students read a passage that was adapted from an explanation about pronunciation (Ur, 2012) and served not only as the initial reading passage (see Appendix A) but also to increase student awareness of pronunciation in language learning. Students were given no prior training or instruction regarding the passage. They were asked to read it into a voice recording application on a digital device. In the case of one class when there was no time to record in class, students were asked to read and record the passage for homework and send the audio file to the instructor.

Stage Two: Lessons Two and Three—Word Final *-s* Awareness Raising Techniques

To maximize the effectiveness of the podcast for pronunciation, we felt that it was necessary to briefly prime the students' awareness of the rules for final *-s* pronunciation. With the purpose of raising students' awareness, in lesson two, we utilized a short exercise from Celce-Murcia et al. (2010, p. 398). This activity involved listening to the song *Sweet Baby James* by James Taylor. Many of the words in the song end with a final /s/, /z/, or /ɪz/ or /əz/, giving students practice with the targeted sounds. Students listened to the song and then on the lyrics sheet, above each word that contained a final *-s*, they

marked which form of the plural, third person singular verb inflection, or possessive they heard, using the phonological representations of the sounds (i.e., /s/, /z/, or /tʒ/ or /əz/). The lyrics of the song proved to be popular and effective in focusing students' attention on the final -s sounds. This type of exercise can be done with any song lyrics that emphasize the sound the instructor wishes to concentrate on with students.

In a third lesson, the students also read a short passage aloud and practiced the pronunciation of the final -s forms. Some suprasegmental features of the passage were taught and practiced, such as thought groups, which are word groups created through appropriate pausing, rising and falling intonation, the linkage between words, stress patterns, and rhythm. The students were asked to mark the passage with notations, as shown in Figure 1. This exercise was challenging for many students and proved useful as a means of highlighting where the students were having difficulties in reading aloud smoothly.

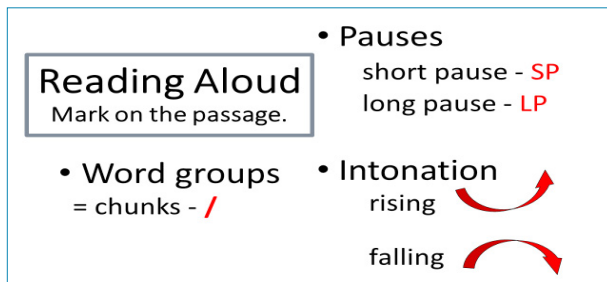


Figure 1. Notation used in reading passage.

Students showed an interest in improving their intonation and pronunciation skills reading the short passage. They spent time with their partners breaking the passage down into appropriate thought groups to determine where pauses needed to be made to achieve an understanding of the text. Through this reading-aloud exercise, we became aware of how, regardless of English level, most students read in a very flat tone, mispronounced words, and paused inappropriately or not at all.

Stage Three: Lessons Four to Six—Student-Produced Podcasts

Although the steps involved in creating the podcasts were the same for each class (research a topic, write a script, practice reading aloud, record, and send to the course

instructor), the content of the podcasts varied according to the topical themes of the individual courses and differed both in style and format. At University A, students in the CEFR A2+ class researched about water problems in countries around the world (see Chase & Johannsen, 2011). They described the problems in detail and then proposed solutions. Students in the CEFR B1 class were divided into pairs and created an original advertisement in an exciting infomercial style (see Chase & Johannsen, 2011). At University B, the students completed an activity entitled “Young People Today,” based on their textbook (Gershon, 2015). After designing and conducting a mini-survey, the students organized their results and reported them in a podcast. In all of the above cases, we approved the topics beforehand.

In lesson four, the students began to create original podcasts by researching their topic on their smartphones in class and writing the scripts. If they did not finish, it was homework to be brought to the next lesson. In lesson five, teachers checked the scripts, particularly for areas that would impede students' communicative intelligibility, and made suggestions for improvement. Such suggestions were not limited to grammatical errors, such as the omission of the final -s, but also to errors of punctuation, structure, coherence, and so forth. After that, students were asked to rewrite their scripts, and by the end of lesson five, they were encouraged to read their scripts aloud and note areas where they were having problems. In lesson six, students once again read their scripts aloud, but this time in front of the instructor who gave them individual pronunciation advice on two areas: one at the segmental level, such as the dropping of the final -s, and another at the suprasegmental level on appropriate stress placement, intonation, rhythm, and appropriate pausing. Students were told to practice three to five times and then record their podcast via their smartphones either in an empty classroom, if one was available, or from home and send the recordings to the instructor. The instructors listened to the podcasts and evaluated them.

Stage Four: Lesson Seven—Revisiting the Initial Passage

In lesson seven, we asked students to record the same short passage from the first lesson again. As with the initial recording, students received no help with the reading and pronunciation of the paragraph. We then compared the student-produced data from the initial recording with the final one. We established criteria to evaluate the recordings, which are explained in the data analysis.

Data Analysis

We conducted three kinds of analysis on the data collected in this project. First, all three of us examined the student recordings of the initial reading and recorded the students' standard of production of the final -s sounds of the 24 focus words (as highlighted in Appendix A). The analysis was based on a scale of 0, 1, or 2 when we evaluated the pronunciation of the s in the diagnostic. Zero signified that the student did not pronounce the final -s at all. One point indicated the presence of the s, but we considered it to be soft or inaccurately pronounced. Two points were given for clear, accurate final -s sounds. Due to time constraints, we all listened to a random selection of five student recordings from each class. In the end, three students failed to submit their final end-of-course recordings, so the total number of core students was 12. We recorded the score for each enunciation, or lack thereof, of the final -s in an Excel spreadsheet. After this evaluation, we gave a general reading-aloud score that took the level of the entire recorded passage into consideration, listening for suprasegmental features, particularly rhythm, intonation, reading pace, and pausing. These scores ranged from 1 to 5. A full score of 5 was given if the student was able to demonstrate good pronunciation, intonation, and rhythm that did not impede a sympathetic listener's comprehension. Scores of 1 or 2 were given to those students who struggled with pronunciation or through odd chunking of the language appeared not to understand what they were reading. We listened to the group of students from each class; that is, we listened to the core students' recordings to score their pronunciation and reading-aloud skills.

Finally, at the end of the project, 38 students completed a survey. Students were asked five questions about their perceptions regarding pronunciation and the value of doing pronunciation work in class (see an example of a survey used in one class in Appendix B). The results of the pronunciation analysis and the final survey, along with an analysis of the responses, are discussed below.

Outcomes of the Podcast Project

The outcomes of the podcast project were both disheartening and encouraging. First, the less substantial outcomes are discussed. Concerning the focus on the final -s sounds, through this project we came to realize that for our students, the final -s sounds were not a big problem, in terms of intelligibility, as we had initially thought. However, all students showed a slight improvement in their production of the final -s sounds when we compared the results of the initial diagnostic to the final diagnostic. The comparison is presented in Table 1. More positive outcomes were evident in the students' overall reading scores (also shown in Table 1). There was an average increase in the scores

from the first recording to the final recording of 0.78 on a scale of 1 to 5. Although such an increase cannot be accounted for solely due to the reading aloud exercises, we nonetheless found the results encouraging. Also encouraging were the outcomes of the students' responses to the survey (see Appendix B).

Table 1. Average Scores of the Core Students for Recording at Time 1 and Time 2 (N = 12)

Time	Pronounced final s sounds / 50	Overall score / 5
Time 1	38.30	2.73
Time 2	42.50	3.51

Survey Results

Question 1 asked the students how important they considered pronunciation to be. Only one student thought pronunciation was not important at all; 33 marked *really important* or above. When asked why they considered pronunciation important, 29 students gave reasons related to the ease of listener comprehension. A representative student response was "I think it is easy for listeners to hear English with good pronunciation." Notwithstanding the discussions relating to ELF and the notion of intelligibility, the students themselves seem to value clear pronunciation. The following are some interesting student comments reproduced here exactly as written. One student wrote, "If I mispronounce, I cannot tell about truth." Another student wrote, "Vocab and grammar are important too." A third student wrote, "b/c my pronunciation doesn't convey to opponent."

It is very interesting that one student equated clear pronunciation with truth, or perhaps this referred to clarity. The student who, quite rightly, considered vocabulary and grammar important seemed to unwittingly reflect the relatively low or vague status that pronunciation often has in general English classes.

Question 2 asked students whether more or less class time should be spent on pronunciation practice. Five students marked less time; the majority considered that the amount of time spent on the pronunciation activities was *about right*, with a slight tendency to want more class time, rather than less, to be spent on pronunciation work. In addition to enjoying producing the podcasts, the students who participated in this project expressed that they liked the explicit pronunciation instruction. This project provided students with an accessible approach that allowed them to notice issues in

their pronunciation. Furthermore, we also gave them the tools to analyze and correct parts of speech so they could become more autonomous in correcting their English pronunciation.

Question 3 asked about the amount of time spent on reading-aloud exercises. Twenty-eight students considered that the amount of time spent on reading-aloud activities was *about right*; a slight majority wanted less class time spent on this kind of exercise.

Question 4 asked students if they thought doing the podcast task helped to improve their English pronunciation. Only one student reported that the podcast was of *no help* and three said of *little help*. For the other students, *helped* was the most common response, but seven students stated it *really helped*. The last question asked the students to write comments about their experience doing the podcast task. In general, the students' responses showed a positive attitude towards the podcast project. However, three students gave scores of 1 or 2, meaning they thought the podcast task did not help or helped them very little. The following were their comments. The student who gave a score of 1 wrote, "It was difficult for me to use graph in PowerPoint." Of the students who gave a score of 2, one student wrote, "I think the podcast task improve my speaking skill little"; the other student wrote, "Everyone was good." The comment about the PowerPoint graphs does not directly relate to the podcast task. The comment about the other students being good may be because this particular student admired the work of his or her classmates but felt less proficient in comparison. Seven students gave a maximum score of 5. In one comment a student wrote, "This task was very helpful for me. . . . With one task, I could learn a lot about pronunciation, writing scripts etc.!" Another student wrote, "Interesting. Podcasts super good." Finally, a third student wrote as a comment: "Can enjoy with pair. Feel so good when praised by teacher. Would like to do podcast project."

In addition to the generally positive attitude of students to the podcast project, the teachers also found the podcasts a satisfying teaching experience. The task proved a means to interact personally with students who were working toward a clear-cut goal. For example, there was purposeful interaction with students in the discussions and corrections of their scripts, in practice reading sessions for their recordings, and in the giving of the final feedback comments.

Summary and Conclusion

This paper described a pedagogical approach, student-centered podcasts, to improve students' pronunciation of word-final *-s*. The project was implemented over the course of seven lessons and involved four major stages. Due to their adaptability and flexibility,

we found that student-produced podcasts are an appropriate and manageable tool to use in the classroom to enable students to work on a variety of languages skills, not only pronunciation of segmental sounds but also potentially suprasegmental features as well. In the future, we would like to undertake a longitudinal research project to measure improvements in reading-aloud skills. We conclude that raising student awareness of pronunciation through recording student-produced podcasts is a worthwhile, stimulating, and enjoyable learning activity.

Bio Data

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Appendix A

Diagnostic Reading Aloud Passage With -s Sounds Highlighted

About Pronunciation

Pronunciation remains (1) an important part of learning to speak foreign languages (2) Pronunciation does (3) not only mean the sounds (4) of a language, but also the rhythm, intonation and stress patterns (5) in spoken languages. (6) Students (7) of English do not have to model their accents (8) on that of an English native speaker (9), but students (10) speech does (11) need to be clear. In some cases (12) conference (13) goes (14) who are non-native speakers (15) of English find the lectures (16) given by other non-natives (17) easier to understand than those given by English native speakers. (18) When mispronounced sounds (19) cause problems (20) for listeners (21) communication break (22) down. Thus, (23) it is (24) a good plan to spend some lesson time on improving students (25) pronunciation.

Adapted from Ur (2012)

Appendix B

Student Feedback Form

Task 3: FEEDBACK

Podcast Project - Young People Today

Please answer the questions about the **Podcast Task**. Check the boxes.



1. How important do you think your pronunciation is when you are speaking in English?

not at all quite important important really important really, really important

What is the reason for your answer?

2. Do you want to spend no time, less time or more class time on pronunciation practice?

no time less time about right more time

3. Do you want to spend no time, less time or more class time on reading aloud exercises?

no time less time about right more time

4. Do you think doing the podcast task helped to improve your English pronunciation?

no help helped a little helped really helped really, really, helped

5. Please write any comment about doing the podcast task?