Using podcasts for learning English: perceptions of Hong Kong Secondary 6 ESL students

Ho Ching Li

Department of English, Hong Kong Institute of Education, Tai Po, Hong Kong

alphaleehk@hotmail.com

Ho Ching Li obtained his bachelor degree in Language Education (English Major) at the Hong Kong Institute of Education (HKIEd) in 2009. After a year's experience as a local secondary school teacher, he is currently studying a MA in Applied English Linguistics at The Chinese University in Hong Kong (CUHK) and is working as a research assistant in HKIEd.

Abstract

This article examines the Hong Kong secondary six (S.6) English as a Second Language (ESL) students' perceptions in the use of podcasting in English learning. Podcasting is a medium for the delivery of information with a large number of podcasts on various topics. It was introduced by Apple's iPod, and is now rapidly increasing the variety of podcasts with educational purposes. The educational benefit of podcasts has been investigated by many experts, yet the idea has still not been introduced in Hong Kong. In the current study, all of the participants agreed that podcasts had enhanced their language skills. Though most of the findings are very impressive, some problems have also occurred. Implications of these results for teaching and learning are discussed.

Background

There is a common perception that Hong Kong students are extremely exam-oriented and passive in class. The Center for Enhanced Learning and Teaching revealed that most Hong Kong students are often prone to rote-learning and lack the initiative to explore ideas by themselves (1996). In this regard, the Hong Kong government has established the Information Literacy Framework for Hong Kong Students to enhance students to learn actively through information technology resources (Education and Manpower Bureau 2005).

In the international context, increasing attention has been given to the use of podcasting as an interactive means in education (Holtz and Hobson 2007; Palmer and Devitt 2007; Salmon and Edirisingha 2008). Podcasting, one of the recent fastest-growing technologies, is defined as an internet-based means of broadcasting information (Holtz and Hobson 2007, p.7). According to Savel *et al* (2007, p.94), the simplest way to get a podcast is through the combination of iPods and iTunes. Podcasting programmes can be found in the iTunes Store (Figure 1) and one just needs to click the "subscribe" button. When the iPod is plugged into a computer, the updated podcast programmes will be downloaded into the iPod. Previous research has considered whether podcasting could be feasible in classes, discussion groups or lectures to gain educational benefits (Evans 2008; Salmon and Edirisingha 2008; Sze 2006). A majority of the students reported that podcasts have value as an additional learning resource enhancing their learning experience. Yet, whether podcasts will specifically bring benefits to language learners in Hong Kong awaits further investigation.

Figure 1: iTunes Store Sample

Literature review

With a 15% increase in the number of podcast users around the world each month, it has become one of the most discussed educational technologies (Podcasting in the Classroom 2008, p.7). It provides educators with a variety of teaching strategies to tackle the needs of the students. Jowitt (2008, p.15) suggests that the advantages of podcasts include the mobility of the device and the flexibility of the content, which eases student learning. In Hong Kong, most students lack exposure to English. Since the handover of Hong Kong to China in 1997, the Hong Kong government has adopted Chinese as the medium of instruction. Hong Kong students do not have enough opportunity to use English, even at school (Standing Committee on Language Education and Research 2003). New technology may be able to build up their motivation in language learning. It is worthwhile investigating whether podcasts can increase students' interest in the language.

At the same time, there are various types of podcasts on the internet targeting different audiences. The podcasts offer all kinds of interesting topics which students can browse through. Some of them even provide transcripts for students to read (e.g. ESL podcasting). Harris and Park (2008, pp.548-550) discuss various types of educational podcasts, such as those that are teaching-driven, service-driven, marketing-driven and technology-driven. Fontichiaro (2008) agrees that providing students with a chance to experience podcasts which match their own interests can promote their willingness to learn. Specific advantages for language learning by using podcasts have been investigated by Sze (2006), a Hong Kong educator. He has discussed how students' listening and speaking skills can be developed through listening to podcasts. Despite the lack of related research in the Hong Kong school context, he has pointed out that using podcasts as a medium to help students learn English is beneficial since student motivation can be enhanced.

Previous research has seldom been carried out in Asia, and podcasting is still a very new technology in Hong Kong. This research investigates the Hong Kong ESL

students' perceptions of podcasts, and helps us to understand how we can incorporate podcasting into our teaching.

Objectives

To study the students' perceptions of using podcasts, three questions were set as the main components of this research:

(1) What are Hong Kong students' attitudes towards podcasts?
(2) Do the students agree that podcasts are a useful tool in language learning?
(3) Are there any problems that are encountered by the students while using podcasts?

Research methodology

A case study approach was employed, which aims at providing a more subjective and interpretive stance in the education field (Gall et al 1996; Johnson 1992; Stake 1994, 1995). The current study also employs a qualitative approach, and hence a deeper investigation (i.e. interviews and questionnaires) is undertaken. Chappelle and Duff (2003) agreed that these instruments provide in-depth data which help in understanding the perceptions of students. Students' perceptions are reported individually in each case. Corresponding quotes from the interview transcripts and the journals are used to support the findings. Furthermore, the questionnaires are summarized and analysed as statistical data.

Instruments

Denzin (1978) discusses methodological triangulation, which is using more than one method to gather data to increase the credibility and validity of the results. In this study, three types of instrument are used—interviews, journal writing and questionnaires. The interview is divided into two parts: the pre-research period (Table 1) and post-research period (Table 2). The first interview is a structured interview with five questions. It mainly focuses on the interviewees' perceptions of using new technology in learning English.

Table 1: Pre-research interview questions

(1) Are you interested in using new technology?
(2) Do you have an iPod?
(3) Have you ever heard of podcasting?
(4) Do you enjoy learning English?
(5) Would you like to use a new technology to learn English?

Straightforward answers can be obtained from the structured interview (Wallace 1998) so I could determine whether the interviewee was willing to participate in the research. The second interview is semi-structured. Questions focus the three objectives of this research.

Table 2: Post-research interview questions

(1) Do you like podcasts? Why?
(2) Do you think podcasts are a useful tool in language learning? Why?
(3) Are there any problems that you have encountered while you are listening to the podcast? What did you do?

Follow-up questions are also asked, so that the answers of the students can be interpreted more accurately. All questions are asked in English and the students can respond in Chinese. This allows them to share more complex ideas in their mother tongue. The quotes of the conversations are translated in the discussion of this article.

The second instrument was a journal (Table 3). It is used each week during the experimental period. Students were required to write a journal each week to show their participation in the podcasting activity. Brock et al (1992) argue that journals can show the hidden affective variables that greatly influence the way students learn. During the experimental period, students are given feedback by the researcher on their journal entries (i.e. which programme is suitable for them to listen to), and hence their participation can be enhanced.

Table 3: Questions for journal entries

(1) Which podcast have you chosen this week? Why?
(2) Do you enjoy listening to the podcast? Is there any problem? Why?
(3) Has this podcast enhanced your interest in learning English? Why?

A questionnaire was used to collect the students' rating on the use of podcasting, which can also provide statistical data (Meyers and Well 1995). Within the questionnaire (Table 4), 13 questions are included. Some of the questions are either sharing the same meaning (e.g. 2 and 10) or contradicting each other (e.g. 6 and 13). This helps to control the accuracy of the data. This is particularly useful for distinguishing whether the participants are answering the questions thoughtfully or just randomly.

The study

Context

The research ran for eight weeks from mid-November 2008 to mid-January 2009 in a Hong Kong Chinese as the medium of instruction (CMI) secondary school. Since most of the original students of this school do not meet the minimum academic requirement set by the Education Bureau, most of the secondary 6 students come from other schools. In fact, the students are not very good at English. Most of them got two to three marks in their Use of English (UE) public exam, which is equivalent to grade E/D. The context can provide all round evidence for the research, as students with different abilities can also be included.

Table 4: Questionnaire: Students' rating of their use of podcasts

Put a 'Tick' in the appropriate box in each statement.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Fair	Agree	Strongly agree
1. I enjoy listening to podcasts					
2. I don't know how to handle this new technology.					
3. Podcasts are difficult.					
4. Podcasts are useful for language learning.					
5. Podcasts bring me no fun at all.					
6. I will not listen to podcasts again after this research.					
7. I think podcasts help me a lot in language learning.					
8. Podcasts are easy to handle.					
9. I don't think podcasts are interesting.					
10. Podcasts are too new to me.					
11. The content of podcasts is not suitable for us.					
12. I like listening to podcasts.					
13. I will listen to podcasts in future.					

Participants

At the beginning of the research period, 10 secondary 6 ESL students were randomly selected to attend the pre-research interview, which aimed to investigate the students' attitude towards participating in the research. If they had negative perceptions towards the technology even before knowing it, they would not be invited to participate in the research. The selection is information-oriented, which helps maximise the utility of information from the participants (Flyvbjerg 2006, p.230). After the interview, students A, B and C were chosen. The students' were aged 17 and 18. These students have different language learning backgrounds, in which one of them studied in an English as the medium of instruction (EMI) school, while the other two studied in CMI schools. Unlike the other two students, student A, who had studied in an EMI school has been listening to podcasts for half a year. He had a rich knowledge about podcasts:

> I listen to podcasts for 20 minutes each time, and I listen to it once every night. [Pre-research interview]

On the other hand, students B and C have shown their enthusiasm in enhancing their English learning by using this new technology.

Procedure

In the first week, three students were picked for the study according to their attitude towards the new technology. The three students were required to attend a training session in the language laboratory where computers, headsets and microphones were prepared. The students were taught on how these facilities are used for listening to podcasts. Podcasts from the iTunes store were also introduced to the students.

Starting from the second week, the students were given a list of podcasting websites (Appendix), in which they could choose the podcast that they would like to listen to. Then each week, the students wrote a journal entry. The journals were collected for monitoring the process of the research. Students A and B have continuously listened to podcasts during the whole process; however, student C discontinued the process after the second week. She did not want to listen to podcasts each week and would prefer spending time on her tutorial classes instead. The duration of the experimental period was six weeks. In the eighth week, all students attended the interview again and completed the questionnaire.

Results

The students like podcasting.

Among the three cases, students A and B have definitely shown their interest in podcasting. In the first week, student A has already requested to write about the same podcast for the rest of his journal entries. He mostly listened to ESL podcasting, which supplies podcasts on various topics about US culture to enhance students' English learning:

> I only choose ESL podcasting. I only listen to that, because it suits my level. [First week journal entry, student A]

Student A listened to this podcast because he wanted to improve his English. Every week, he carried on his listening habits and provided feedback in the journal. Most of the time he talked about what he had listened to and he did not encounter any problems at all in the experimental period.

Though student B emphasised that his reason to listen to podcasts was solely to improve his listening skills, when he was asked how he would describe podcasting to other ESL learners, he stated:

> It is fun and is easy to follow. [Post-research interview, student B]

He regarded podcasting as an interesting medium for language learning. He has written up every journal entry and each week he would try to listen to different types of podcasting. Most of the time, he enjoyed the podcast he chose:

> I listened to a podcast about jokes. It is about some chats in the bar and it is hilarious. [Second week journal entry, student B]

> I listened to an ESL podcast which student A has introduced to me. I also enjoyed listening to something about the U.S. culture. I think the jokes were quite interesting. [Third week journal entry, student B]

Student B expressed the opinion that podcasts were more fun than textbooks, because the contents were always up-to-date and entertaining. On the other hand, though student C did not carry on the research in the middle of the experimental period, she did follow the instruction given and listened to some podcast programmes in the first two weeks. Here is her feedback:

> I have listened to a podcast about American jokes, they are fun. The stories are very interesting. But I cannot understand some of their accents. I think podcasts are useful for improving my listening skills, because I can learn more English. [First week journal entry, student C]

> I listened to a podcast about songs. I think it is very weird, I mean the melody. It is not my cup of tea. [Second week journal entry, student C]

After each entry, I provided her with some more podcast sites, which she might be interested in. She explained that she was busy with her studies and did not want to listen to podcasts every week. I did not force her because I wanted her to develop her interest in podcasts on her own.

In the questionnaire statistics (Table 5), all three participants agreed that they enjoyed listening to podcasts and disagreed with the statement that 'Podcasts bring me no fun at all.' In the questionnaire, student A rates 'strongly agree' with the following statement:

> I enjoy listening to podcasts.

Student B strongly agreed that he would listen to podcasts in the future and has indicated that he would not stop listening to podcasts after the research period. It can be concluded that podcasts are welcomed by the students.

Table 5: Questionnaire statistics

		Strongly disagree	Disagree	Fair	Agree	Strongly agree
1.	I enjoy listening to podcasts.				B, C	A
2.	I don't know how to handle this new technology.	A	B, C			
3.	Podcasts are difficult.	A	B, C			
4.	Podcasts are useful for language learning.					*A, B, C*
5.	Podcasts bring me no fun at all.	A, B	C			
6.	I will not listen to podcasts again after this research.	A, B		C		
7.	I think podcasts help me a lot in language learning.				C	A, B
8.	Podcasts are easy to handle.					*A, B, C*
9.	I don't think podcasts are interesting.	A, B	C			
10.	Podcasts are too new to me.	*A, B, C*				
11.	The content of podcasts is not suitable for us.	A, B		C		
12.	I like listening to podcasts.			C		A, B
13.	I will listen to podcasts in future.			C		A, B

The students agree that podcasts are a useful tool in language learning.

In the post-research period, a semi-structured interview was conducted, to acquire a more in-depth understanding of student A's initiation to listening to podcasts. One of the reasons that triggered student A to start listening to podcasts is his willingness to improve his English. He agreed that podcasts have improved his listening skills. However, when he was asked if any evidence can be provided, he admitted that he had started this habit just three months previously, and thus he could not demonstrate any proof of improvement. He stated the following in the post-research period:

> In the beginning, I tried to read the transcript while I was listening. Without the transcript, it would be hard for me to catch up the content. Now, I am getting better, I try not to read the transcript. I am surprised that I can still catch up. [Post-research interview, student A]

> I enjoy listening to the culture of the US. It is fun to learn things this way. Most of the time, I listen to dialogue. I think my speaking skills have improved as well. [Post-research interview, student A]

From the above quotes, it is shown that student A believed that podcasts had improved both his listening skills and speaking skills; he listens to podcasts every day.

Students B and C both agreed that podcasts had motivated them to listen to English. In the post-research interview, student B said that he listened to podcasts twice a week during the research period, as he wanted to immerse himself in English. After four weeks, student B found that listening to podcasts had strengthened his listening skills:

> I think my listening skill has improved. I started having a preliminary expectation to the words that the speakers are going to say. It is quite exciting. [Fourth week journal entry, student B]

On the other hand, student C argued that if she did not have so many tutorial classes, she would have listened more to podcasts. Student C has shared more about her perceptions on podcasting in the post-research interview. She agreed that podcasting was useful for her language learning. After a six-week connection with podcasting, they all strongly agreed that podcasting was a useful tool for language learning in listening and speaking.

In the questionnaire, students A and B strongly agreed 'Podcasting helps me a lot in language learning.' Although student C did not continue her participation throughout the process, she also agreed with that statement. At the end, students A, B and C all strongly agreed: 'Podcasting is useful for language learning.' This indicates that they all realised the usefulness of podcasts in language learning.

The students find it hard to choose a suitable podcasts.

Choosing a podcast that is suitable for listening is not easy for any of the participants. Student A also encountered problems when he started listening to the podcasts:

> I searched a lot of podcasting sites in the iTunes Store. Most of them are not for ESL students. I needed to keep subscribing and deleting the subscription. I finally stayed with this one (ESL podcasting) because it was designed for ESL learners. [Post-research interview, student A]

Student B also thought it was difficult to find a suitable podcast, because some of the podcasts were designed for native speakers. He thus spent a lot of time searching for podcasts. Student B agreed that some of the podcasts on the internet were boring and were not suitable for ESL learners.

Student C encountered two major problems when she listened to podcasts. First of all, the length of the podcast was too long, while the content of the second one did not arouse her interest. Podcasts are not solely designed for educational purposes and especially for ESL learners. It takes time for students to choose a podcast that suits them. Her complaints are reasonable and it encourages us to think how we can help.

Discussion

An interest in podcasting depends on the style of podcasting

From the above case studies, it is reasonable to suggest that podcasting can be introduced to Hong Kong ESL students. The participants have shown their willingness to use this new technology. However, student C's case should be noted. She originally agreed to listen to podcasts, but then gave up. The reason behind her

move might be because the type of podcast was not suitable for her and thus hindered her involvement. According to Salmon and Edrisingha (2008), the style of podcast is important. It is the key to holding students' attention. It needs to be interesting to listen to as well as informative. Student C is typically one of those who gets lost in the style of podcast. It actually takes time to choose a suitable podcast to listen to. However, she lost her patience and was not willing to try again. This is a very good example for Hong Kong teachers who want to bring podcasts into classrooms. The style of podcast is extremely important to enhance the students' interest. Though it takes time, the benefits podcasts bring to students are overwhelming.

Podcasting is a useful tool for language learning in the Hong Kong ESL classroom

The aim of listening to podcasts is straightforward. Podcasting can work as an accessible platform for students to expose themselves to the language. In student A's case, he realized his listening skills and speaking skills were enhanced and agreed that podcasting was a useful tool for language learning. This finding is not a surprise to educators. According to Harris and Park (2008, pp.549-550), student A's choice, ESL podcasting is service-driven, which aims at delivering information to students and hence improves their language skills.

Student B also found that his listening skills had improved because he started having preliminary knowledge of the content. He believed this was because of his exposure to the language and his enthusiasm for listening to various types of podcast. Although student C did not enjoy the podcasts very much, she agreed that listening to podcasts had improved her language learning.

Bringing the benefits of podcasts to the Hong Kong context

Podcasts are under-utilised in the Hong Kong education field. Sze (2006) discusses how different types of podcasts could develop the listening and speaking skills of students. This research has shown that students in Hong Kong can also get benefits from podcasts. In order to match with the Hong Kong context, we do not need to download podcasts solely from the internet – podcasts can also be tailor-made to cater for the needs of the students (Harris and Park 2008; Stephens 2007). Teachers can design their own level of materials. Other materials like transcripts and visual images can also be provided in podcasts. Video podcasts can help expand topics that require image display (Corl *et al* 2008, p.26). Therefore, students at any level can also get benefits from them. Student podcasts can be developed to enhance the students' experience of learning and this would be quite suitable to be promoted in Hong Kong. Since the New Senior Secondary policy has focused on the students' interpersonal experience, podcasts can provide students with a more authentic and personal experience to learn the language (Curriculum Development Council 2007).

Length of podcasts affects students' perceptions of podcasting

In the research, the length of the podcast had a huge impact on the students' habits. Students B and C agreed that sometimes the length of the podcast was quite intolerable to them, especially when some of the podcasts did not provide any visual images. Student C particularly expressed that the length of podcasts was one of the factors that made her reluctant in continuing the research.

Chan *et al* (2006, p.115) suggest that the length of the podcast should be about five minutes, roughly the length of a typical song. This may help address the problem. On the other hand, Stephens (2007, p.55) notes that podcasts do not need much equipment to create. In order to minimize the disruption caused by the length of the podcast, teachers can create podcasts in accordance with students' preference. Richardson (2006) also encouraged educators to embrace this technology inside the classroom.

Conclusion

This research aims at finding out about the perception of Hong Kong ESL Secondary 6 students towards podcasts. Generally, the findings are positive and the research objectives are well achieved. The students all agreed that podcasts could increase their listening skills and they were interested in carrying on these listening habits. Some problems have also been identified in the research, including the length and the style of the podcast. All these problems can be solved if teachers design appropriate content for the students. The major benefit of podcasts is to provide more opportunities for students to expose themselves to the language. Although the small sample size of this research may not be able to reveal the whole picture of the Hong Kong context, the in-depth approach provides us with concrete and critical data for further research, such as research on students' interest in different podcast topics and levels. Furthermore, lower level students can also be investigated, as podcasts should not be limited only to senior students. Our students are ready to take on the challenges of podcasts. Whether the use of podcasts can be developed in the Hong Kong classroom or not rests on our willingness to try.

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Appendix: Lists of podcast directories and resources online

Podcast directories

Apple iTunes (download required) – http://www.apple.com/itunes
Podcast Alley – http://www.podcastally.com
Podcast Pickle – http://www.podcastpickle.com
Yahoo – http://podcasts.yahoo.com

Podcasting resources on the Web

iLounge – http://ipodlounge.com
Podcast 411 – http://www.podcast411.com
Podcast Expert – http://www.podcastexpert.com
Podcasting news – http://www.podcastingnews.com

ELT podcasts

Manythings (songs) – http://www.manythings.org/songs/
Manythings (jokes) – http://www.manythings.org/jokes/
Englishpodsong – http://englishpodsong.blogspot.com
Englishcaster (Vocabulary, idioms, slang, etc.) http://www.englishcaster.com/idioms/
e-poche (scripted conversations) – http://www.e-poche.net/conversations/
English through stories – http://www.englishthroughstories.com
ESL podcasting – http://www.eslpod.com/website/index.php
Phonetics – http://phoneticpodcast.com
Students podcasts (created by students)
Barcelona Young EFL Podcasts – http://bylpodcasts.blogspot.com
Japanese students' podcasts – http://downthepond.podomatic.com
Read aloud by students – http://www.aidenyeh.podomatic.com
Bardwell Road Centre Podcast – http://www.bardwellroad.podomatic.com