PARSONS, Martin – Applying podcasts to English language education and social issues...
Para lá da tarefa: implicar os estudantes na aprendizagem de línguas estrangeiras no ensino superior.
Porto: FLUP, 2019, pp. 260-274
DOI: https://doi.org/10.21747/9789898969217/paraa14

Applying podcasts to English language educationand social issues in a Japanese university

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Abstract

The rapid ageing of Japanese society has led to a dramatic increase in the number of elderly people living alone, some of whom feel they are no longer of value to society. Many younger Japanese people have little contact with older people, yet these same older citizens have lived full lives and experienced or witnessed profound changes in Japan and the wider world. These experiences may represent a learning opportunity for younger Japanese if they could be made accessible.

Concurrently, while most learners in Japan study English for several years, few have the opportunity to use English outside the classroom. Moreover, many find themselves in teacher-centred learning environments, are passive in class, appear to lack motivation, and are increasingly unwilling to study or work abroad. Podcasts, a popular form of communication, offer a potential medium to give foreign language learners the opportunity to engage with and speak on topics of removed from their classroom experience.

This paper describes the development of an English language, oral-history podcast produced by students in collaboration with older members of the community, focussing on the recollections of events in recent Japanese history which are meaningful to them. The aims of the podcast are to attempt to forge personal connections between members of the community who rarely come into contact with one another; deepen the understanding among young Japanese of recent history; and give students meaningful subject matter with which to develop their English language skills.

*Keywords***:** Podcast, EFL, social inclusion, elderly loneliness, Japan, oral history

1 – Introduction

Students in the modern, globalising world are increasingly being asked to display multi-faceted skill sets alongside their specialised fields of knowledge, including

DOI: https://doi.org/10.21747/9789898969217/paraa14

technological know-how, foreign language expertise and also exhibit an awareness of and commitment to their community and the wider society.

With regard to technology, a mastery of various digital applications and platforms is often expected. While digital technology is in an almost constant state of flux – emerging, developing, or even becoming obsolete and/or discontinued (such as in the case of VHS and audio tape), the importance of being able to use the available technology to produce and disseminate data and information has remained constant, giving rise to the term 'information society'. However, as the aphorism attributed to Clifford Stoll notes, 'data is not information; information is not knowledge; knowledge is not understanding; and understanding is not wisdom'. It is the skills that transform information into knowledge, which then can be distributed and wisely used for the betterment of society that are emerging as the most valuable in the 21st century, a concept often referred to as the 'knowledge society' (Drucker, 1993). UNESCO considers that "the idea of the information society is based on technological breakthroughs", while "the concept of knowledge societies encompasses much broader social, ethical and political dimensions", which requires the application of education and critical thinking (UNESCO, 2005, p. 17). The UN further states that the knowledge society "is not only about technological innovations, but also about human beings, their personal growth and their individual creativity, experience and participation" (UN, 2005).

With regard to foreign language skills, for better or worse, the reality is that English is now the language most commonly used in many domains, including science, academia and the business world (Crystal, 2003; Graddol, 2006; Lønsmann, 2015). Knowledge always has been and will continue to be created and distributed in all languages, yet the international exchange of ideas and knowledge is now likely to be conducted more often in English than in any other language, implying that the development of English language skills is of great importance for future participants in globalising societies.

With regard to social commitment, it must be recognised that language is a communication tool and should be rooted in community. Language learning for the sake of test-taking, as is often the case in a context like Japan, is a sterile goal. In short, for language learning to be of genuine value, it ought to be infused with social and cultural purposes and meanings.

This paper describes the genesis and development of a preliminary attempt to draw these strands together in a single project with Japanese university learners of English, through the use of oral-history podcasts to engage with older members of society. In order to elucidate the project, a brief synopsis of various issues pertinent to it (English

DOI: https://doi.org/10.21747/9789898969217/paraa14

language education in Japan; demographic issues related to the elderly; and the definition of a podcast) will be presented and then followed by a description of the project itself and the results of a survey of the participants.

2 – English language education in Japan

The Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) and business groups such as the Japan Business Federation (*Keirendan*) have long urged improvements in English language education at the tertiary level, specifically calling for educational approaches which will develop a knowledge-based society and global human resources (Keidanren, 2000; 2013; MEXT, 2003; 2008; 2010; 2013a; 2014).

Paradoxically, over the same period it has been noted that the number of young people willing to work or study abroad has been dropping (Dujarric & Takenaka, 2014; Sanno Institute of Management, 2017; Tanikawa, 2011). One of the main reasons for this seems to be a lack of confidence in foreign language skills, which in turn is thought to be caused by the teacher-centred educational approach still common in many Japanese classrooms (Kimura, Nakata & Okamura, 2001; Nishino, 2008). In the case of English language education, this is typified by the entrance examinations most learners take before progressing to high school and university, in which the acquisition of grammatical and lexical knowledge and the ability to translate, often de-contextualised, sentences between English and Japanese are emphasised (Brown & Yamashita, 1995; Guest, 2000; Imamura, 1978; Taguchi, 2005), and which in turn is believed by many to be the underlying cause for the prevalence of a teaching methodology known as *yakudoku* (usually glossed into English as 'grammar-translation').

Although some have seen improvements in the way these entrance examinations are structured (e.g., Guest, 2008), it is still perceived by many that they are the agent which drives English teachers in Japanese schools to use the so-called *yakudoku* method (Gorsuch, 2001; Hino, 1988). For example, in 2012, Professor Negishi Masashi of Tokyo University of Foreign Studies claimed that English language teaching could be expected to improve only when university entrance examinations begin to test for more communicative skills (*Yomiuri Shimbun*, 2012). As the status of one's graduating university is widely believed to have a strong influence on future employment prospects, entrance examinations are highly influential in education (Nakane, 1984; Reischauer, 1977; Sugimoto, 2010; Takahashi, 2004).

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The upshot is that in Japan, where there is rarely any need to use English in daily life, few learners have opportunities to engage with English communicatively even in the classroom, and they tend to be passive learners who often have difficulty in expressing opinions (Shimizu, 2006; Turner & Hiraga, 1996), with wholly expected negative effects on motivation (Berwick & Ross, 1989; Brown, 2004; Kikuchi, 2013; Kimura, Nakata & Okumura, 2001; Ushioda, 2013).

The response to this situation from MEXT urges that 'for undergraduate education, we should promote activities to change the quality of education, such as active learning (learning in which students proactively find issues and solutions), interactive lectures, practice, and experiments' (MEXT, 2013b), a position which informs this project.

3 – The situation facing the elderly in Japan

Japan is a rapidly ageing society. Births have been declining for a number of years, and despite the fact that the number of deaths has also been declining, Japan has now entered a period of population decline (IPSS, 2014). As general health care has improved, maternal and infant mortality rates have decreased dramatically over the course of the last century. People are living longer, and Japan now has the greatest proportion (28.1%) of elderly citizens in its population in the world (Statistics Japan, 2018).

At the same time, the make-up of Japanese households, which until relatively recently had often been multi-generational, has also rapidly changed. Although the overall population is decreasing, due to various social and legal changes, such as greater autonomy and laws on equality for women, the number of households in Japan is rising (IPSS, 2014). By 2015, there were 5,928,000 people aged over 65 living alone, almost 7 times as many as in 1980 (Statistics Japan, 2018).

In Western imagery, the elderly in Japan seem to be believed to be treated with great respect by younger members of society. Unfortunately, this idealisation of aging may not reflect reality explored in research, which sees a more nuanced and not necessarily positive attitude toward the elderly among Japanese youth (Koyano, 1989). The demographic changes noted in the previous paragraph may also have at least in part caused a situation in which the elderly now often find themselves to have little contact with other people (OECD, n.d.). This has, in turn, given rise to a phenomenon of elderly people also dying alone, sometimes their deaths being undiscovered for days, weeks or even months (Morita, et. al., 2015; Onishi, 2017). A 2010 government survey found that almost two thirds of people over the age of 60 worry about dying alone with no-one to

care for them (Cabinet Office, 2010). It has even been suggested that some elderly Japanese are committing petty crimes simply to be put in prison in order to avoid living in solitude (e.g. Fukuda, 2018). Clearly, Japan is not just facing a social-security crisis, but also a crisis of loneliness amongst the elderly.

However, these same older citizens have lived full lives, have experienced and witnessed profound changes in Japanese society and in the wider world. This knowledge and these experiences represent a vast learning opportunity for Japanese youth if they could be made accessible. Yet, one obvious corollary of older citizens becoming estranged from the rest of society is that younger Japanese people have come to have less contact with senior citizens, even with older generations of their own family, a phenomenon which the this project attempts to grapple with, albeit on a small scale.

4 – On podcasts

In recent years, podcasts have become a very popular mode of digital communication around the world. There are now literally thousands of podcasts on a wide variety of topics and in various languages available to consumers. According to Edison Research, 44% of people in the USA alone, an estimated 124 million people, have listened to a podcast and 48 million listen to at least one podcast each week (Edison Research, 2018).

Regardless, in Japan they are almost unknown. Anecdotally, few seem to be aware even of the existence of podcasting technology. Prior to commencing this project, a survey of 1st and 2nd year university students in Japan, including the students involved in the study reported on here, revealed that 77% (n=180) had never heard the term ‘podcast’, and of those that had few were able to define it accurately.

The term ‘podcast’ itself is a portmanteau of the words ‘iPod’ and ‘broadcast’. A simple way of thinking about podcasts is to imagine extremely mobile television or radio. Generally, and notwithstanding newer technologies such as ‘on-demand’ and ‘streaming’, one can only watch or listen to whatever is being broadcast at a given moment. By contrast, a podcast is usually hosted on a dedicated website from which it may be downloaded by consumers. The video or audio can then be replayed on the device of choice – smartphone, tablet, computer, etc. – whenever and wherever, without regard to internet connection.

A growing body of research on podcast use in education has been conducted, which is largely positive and suggests that podcasts are well received by students. In a general review of the literature on video podcasts, Kay (2012) found most studies reported positively regarding student affective and cognitive attitudes. Some of the studies

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reviewed also noted improvements in study behaviour. Copley (2007) found that the majority of students taking traditional courses rated podcasts used in the preparation of assessments, note-taking, and review of missed lectures as very useful. Greene and Crespi (2012) found that students in business classes enjoyed creating video podcasts and considered it educationally valuable. In a study on the use of podcasts, Nwosu et. al. (2017) found that medical education podcasts show potential in facilitating communication between various stakeholders in palliative care, such as private citizens, researchers and policymakers.

More specifically in foreign language education, Kavaliauskiene and Anusiene (2009) found that students considered listening to podcasts outside of class time less anxiety inducing than listening to authentic materials in class. Hasan and Tan (2012) found improved listening skills among university ESL learners, as well as positive response to using the podcasts. Al Qasim and Al Fadda (2013) also ascribe improved listening skills and motivation among university students to podcast use, while Bamanger and Alhassan (2015) found students highly motivated by podcasts, which led to improved writing performance.

After receiving a brief description of what a podcast is, 82% of students (n=177) in the initial survey expressed an interest in using them in English language learning. This suggests the possibility of employing an innovative approach to foreign language learning in the Japanese context. In such an EFL environment, where English language usage usually ceases at the classroom door, podcasts may represent an as yet largely unexploited resource.

In a broader sense, podcasting technology also represents an educational opportunity beyond the learning of language and content. Nie, et. al. (2008) claim that results from a study in which students produced podcasts ‘also highlighted other benefits, particularly in developing team-working, organisation and other transferable skills which were perceived crucial for medical students. Similarly, Beamish and Brown (2008) indicate that producing podcasts was positively viewed by students who saw the process as ‘increasing the relevance of their learning experience.’

The studies reviewed here, from a number of different contexts and geographical regions, indicate that podcasts have the potential to provide positive educational outcomes for students, and that student-generated podcasts also have the potential to be a positive agent in affective domains.

5 – The pilot project

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Against this backdrop, a pilot project to engage students in the production of podcasts based on the memories of older members of society, which sought to address the issues outlined above, was conceived. In attempting to draw all the relevant issues together in a single project, the study was driven by two basic questions:

1. Is a project/approach of this type likely to be received positively by students and community members?
2. Is a project/approach of this type worthy of further development and investigation?

The participants in the project were 26 students enrolled in a public university in a regional city of Japan, and seven elderly residents of the same city. The pilot project proceeded as follows:

3. An older community member provided a written suggestion for a topic for a podcast from their life experience. Some examples were the impact of the widespread introduction white goods to homes in the 1950s and 1960s; memories of a once popular festival which is now rarely celebrated; and childhood wartime memories.
4. In pairs, students undertook background research into the topic, followed by writing potential interview questions, searching for useful archival material, music and sound effects to be used in the podcast.
5. Students were given instruction in editing audio, using a free application, Audacity.
6. The older members of the community visited the students at their university. One 90-minute lesson was set aside to conduct and record interviews.
7. Students then storyboarded, wrote, recorded and edited a short oral-history, audio podcast.
8. The completed podcast was presented to the older person for comment and feedback.
9. Finally, online surveys were conducted to ascertain the participants' attitudes to the project.

6 – Results

At the end of the project, twenty-five students and six of the seven community members took questionnaire surveys to assess their impressions of the project.

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Only two of the twenty-five students said that the technology was known to them before undertaking the production of podcasts. Additionally, eighteen noted that it was not easy for them to learn to use the technology, and a further twelve reported having technical difficulties, suggesting that successfully completing this project was not something that came easily to them.

Moreover, nineteen students expressed a concern about their pronunciation and other vocal characteristics. It is rare in most English language classes in Japan for students to have the opportunity to actually hear themselves speak in a foreign language. It may simply be that not having listened to themselves before, many students were surprised and/or disappointed by the sound of their own voice, just as native speakers of a language often react negatively to hearing themselves on recorded media. On the other hand, this suggests possibilities for improving the teaching of pronunciation through the use of self and peer-review of personal recordings.

However, nearly all students (24) said that they found the project to have been interesting. One area of concern in the conception of the project was in the basic idea of asking students to talk to older people not known to them. Given the changing demographics in Japan (outlined above), the idea that the students and elderly citizens just might not 'be on the same wave length' was a genuine possibility which would almost certainly have led to the failure of the project from the outset. Yet, twenty students reported enjoying the opportunity of talking with the older citizens, and a further twenty-two said that they would like to be able to learn more about history in this way.

Twenty students also said they thought the project had been good for their English language learning, though it was not asked of them in what areas they felt it to be beneficial. Nineteen also reported that they would like to use more podcasts in their English language learning, and sixteen said that they would like to make more podcasts, suggesting that the potential observed in research in other contexts held true for this study in Japan.

Six of seven older community members responded to a questionnaire and reported a high level of satisfaction with the project.

Five of the six felt that students had prepared well for their interview, although one person was disappointed not have had more feedback or Q & A on the day of the interview, reflecting the possibility that this person, at least, was not fully aware of the aims of the project. Importantly, all six felt that the students were interested in what they had to say, confirming the survey results from the students in which they registered their interest in meeting the older community members.

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Three of the six considered the completed podcast as excellent, and two thought it good. One person felt that the podcast did not accurately reflect what they had wanted to say, but unfortunately did not provide any details.

Finally, all six community members reported that they enjoyed the project, enjoyed communicating with the students and that they would like to engage in similar projects in the future. One person commented that participating in the project with young people infused her or him with the energy of youth. All six also said they would be prepared to recommend participating in such a project to their friends, further reflecting their positive evaluation of the project.

7 – Conclusion and reflections

The aim of this project was, in a sense, to provide 'proof of concept' for the idea of bringing together several different strands of educational practice in a single, unifying project.

Responses to the questionnaires in response to Research Question 1 suggest that it was attractive to both students and elder community members, who largely reported positive impressions of the project. As such, creating oral-history podcasts based on the memories of older members of society emerges as a viable approach to creating a link between social groups that otherwise might not come into contact, while at the same time potentially enhancing students' digital literacy, communication skills and English language skills.

The fact that community members and most students expressed a strong interest in doing something similar again indicates that, as Research Question 2 asked, the project has the potential to be developed into a larger, ongoing project which is not only of educational value to students, but of potential social value to their community.

Several lines of research suggest themselves for future investigation. From the English language learning standpoint:

> Are there perceptible improvements to English language skills as a result of this kind of project, and concretely what improvements can be detected (e.g. pronunciation, intonation; listening comprehension; development of storytelling skills, etc.)? In this project, many students lacked confidence in their personal production of English, which opens the possibility of following a line of research into the effects of instructor directed pronunciation and intonation teaching and feedback assistance in conjunction with podcasting technology. While most

students felt this project was beneficial for their own English language learning, it was not specified in what way. Delving more deeply into this would be worthwhile.

From the technical standpoint:

Does a project of this type lead to perceptible improvements in digital literacy among students, and specifically of what nature? Does engagement in this kind of project lead to students being better equipped to participate in a global, digital society?

From the social standpoint:

Does this type of project help raise consciousness among students of the situation of elderly members of society? Do elderly members of society feel more engaged and more valued? Are there perceptible improvements to students' communication skills?

Along with the above suggestions for future studies, some caveats about the present study should also be mentioned. In some cases, the general quality of the completed podcasts was lacking. To some extent this was a consequence of stylistic choices by students, who had not had experience in creating this kind of media before. However, physical and technological issues faced by students also played a part in the quality concerns of the finished product. Finding suitably quiet locations for recording of interviews turned out to be challenging. The facilities available at the university where this study took place for students to edit their podcasts were poorly equipped for audio podcast production. Computer rooms are shared by many students simultaneously, meaning there is the possibility of extraneous noise in recordings. The quality of microphones provided in the computer rooms was less than optimal, leading to a great deal of hiss in recordings as well as leading to frustration on the part of students.

It also became clear as the project progressed that more time should probably have been allocated to giving students a chance to become familiar with recording equipment and editing software. Students are extremely proficient in using their personal smart telephones to engage in a wide range of tasks, but apparently less so when using more specialised equipment and software – at least in this particular case. An all too common assumption that younger people like millennials are more technologically savvy than prior generations may lead to the mistaken conclusion that they do not require assistance in this domain. For example, it has been noted that the students in this study had little to

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no experience of listening to podcasts, let alone creating them. As such, it seems likely that in many cases they would not have been aware enough of the importance of the sound quality of the recordings they were making until the time for editing came, at which point it is generally too late do make all but superficial improvements to quality. Some reported not really understanding how to use recording equipment well, and the audio of recordings suggested that the placement of microphones for interviews was not well considered. It is very likely that more time dealing with these issues in a practical, hands-on sense would have been advantageous.

As such, investigators seeking to undertake similar projects should endeavour to ensure the best possible scenario for success by giving students ample practice time with the various components of the project, and in securing good quality microphones; computers with enough processing power to ensure smooth editing (this would be of even greater importance in dealing with video podcasts); and locations for conducting and recording interviews which minimise extraneous noise.

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