

# How Technology Facilitates Student-Centered Learning: Spotlight on an EFL Course

Damon Brewster • Hans von Dietze

Keywords : technology, podcast, language, learner, classroom, EFL

## Abstract

In 2008, a podcasting course was introduced as an accredited course into the English Language Program at J. F. Oberlin University, Tokyo. This course takes students through the process of creating and publishing their own podcasts with the overall goal of improving English proficiency. This paper introduces this course, beginning with a brief background of podcasting, before outlining the widespread benefits of the course to students. These include instruction in the four skill-areas, improvement in pronunciation and intonation, taking English outside the classroom, broadening IT skills and providing opportunities for self-assessment of spoken English. The paper also highlights benefits to teachers, technical requirements, feedback from student surveys and the types of tasks that students completed. Any teacher interested in podcasting in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) will be able to follow this practical guide to set up similar courses.

ポッドキャストは正規科目として桜美林大学 ELP プログラムにおいて 2008 年度より開講されている。この科目の目的は、学生が自らのポッドキャストを作成し、公開するプロセスを通して英語の運用力を高めることにある。本稿では、ポッドキャスト導入の背景を説明し、4 技能の総合的な指導に加え、発音・抑揚の向上、授業外での英語使用の機会、IT スキルの習得、英語発話の自己評価の機会など、多岐にわたるその意義と効果について述べる。また、教員にとっての意義、必要な技術、学生の評価アンケートの結果、及び学生が取り組んだ課題についても触れる。英語教育におけるポッドキャストの活用について興味のある教員は、本稿を実践ガイドとして同様の授業を展開できるはずである。

## Introduction

Technology is changing at a dramatic pace. Today educators have access to more materials, information and possibilities than ever before. The challenge is to stay in touch and take advantage of these technological advances. At J. F. Oberlin University this process is evident: Obirin TV on the university homepage, uses YouTube to promote campus activities, departments are using a course management system called 'moodle' to provide online support and many administrative processes are done online. Computer rooms are dotted around campus, and newer classrooms are fitted with computers with Internet access and projectors.

Teachers too are adapting to these new ways. PowerPoint presentations are now the norm, students submit assignments in digital form, lesson plans and materials are stored on 'z-drives' - folders assigned to all teachers and students on the university server - and in language classes, cassette tapes have given way to CD's, which in turn are giving way to CD-ROM's and MP3 files. Each new technological advances offers potential, and educators must review and appraise this with a view to meeting the needs of today's students. Whilst there is a learning curve for many teachers, for students this changing environment is much more normal.

For students in Japan, technology is a part of life. They have grown up with the Internet, they have email accounts, and are everyday users of sites such as facebook, twitter and YouTube. Moreover they are familiar with the many gadgets that accompany digital technology. Most have a 'keitai' (mobile phone) and can be seen listening to music, playing games or watching movies on portable media players such as MP3 players like iPods and the more recent iPads. These gadgets have become the 'must-have' items for young adults today.

This offers educators an opportunity to provide pedagogically sound content in a format that is not only appealing to students, and readily accessible, but also easy to use. And one option that meets these criteria is podcasting. The University of Missouri, in a white paper on podcasting and vodcasting (2005), state that, 'they will immediately be adopted by the current class of students' and conclude that 'the portable and on-demand nature of podcasting and vodcasting make them technologies worth pursuing, implementing and supporting'.

This paper provides a general background to the podcasting phenomenon and its application in university settings before reporting on the progress of a podcasting course the authors introduced into the English Language Program at J. F. Oberlin University. The paper will go on to outline the basic technology behind podcasting, will provide practical guidance

on what is needed in the classroom, and will finally highlight some of the benefits for both teachers and students. This will draw on the authors' observations and practical experience and also on feedback students have given in class surveys.

## **What is a Podcast?**

While most people have heard of the term 'podcast' and recognize that it is a kind of audio file, many are still unsure as to what exactly it means. The term itself has been around since 2004 (Hammersley, 2004) as a combination of *iPod* and the term *broadcast*, and perhaps because of this some people have been misled to believe that you need an iPod to listen to podcasts. While it is true that podcasts consist of an audio file, usually in MP3 format, importantly they are a series of audio or video files on the Internet, which can be cataloged and then automatically downloaded to any personal audio player. They use an RSS (Really Simple Syndication) 'feed' that allows the audio file to be released and downloaded automatically to the user's computer, MP3 player, or mobile phone (Podcasting Dictionary, n.d.). Users log on to a podcasting subscription service, such as iTunes or Juice and 'subscribe' to that site's feeds. Content is then automatically received when it is uploaded, or published, to the Internet. As additional content is made available, it too is automatically downloaded, without the user needing to check websites for updates. It is important to note that podcasts now encompass video content too; they are no longer only audio.

Since its opening in 2003, the iTunes online music store has become the world's largest retailer of digital music (Krazit, 2010) In addition to music, the store also makes over 150,000 podcasts available for users to subscribe to or download. Any quick search of these podcasts, produced by national corporations such as the BBC through to privately made recordings in home studios, will find any number of programmes on almost any topic. Such is the rapid development of podcasting, that since 2005, when Geoghegan & Klass indicated that 'thousands of people are already involved' (2007, p. 1), it is now impossible to indicate exactly how many podcasts are available, as thousands are being added daily. And since these podcasts often follow the structure of a typical radio or television show, everyone can easily identify with the format. They can just download and listen.

### **General benefits of podcasting**

In the field of language learning, there are several aspects of podcasts that make them appealing. Firstly, the vast majority of podcasts are free, opening up a world of content for students to explore in their L1 and L2. Secondly, the portable nature of MP3 players means that podcasts can be listened to (or watched) anywhere, pausing and rewinding when needed. This feature is particularly valuable when focusing on listening skills. Moreover, transcripts of shows can be attached, giving the listener the opportunity to read the content while listening to the audio. This too is a valuable feature for language learners. And since many podcasts are supported by a website, more materials such as vocabulary lists and worksheets are often available.

As has been outlined, podcasts are much more than an audio file. Taking students through the process of creating and publishing their own shows gives them access to the four skill areas – Listening, Speaking, Reading, Writing – as well as to a much wider resource. The podcasting course encourages students to become part of this global phenomenon and, like blogging, gives individuals a chance to have their voices heard.

### **Podcasting in higher education**

The popularity of the MP3 players, and podcasts in particular, brought about a swift response from higher education. Universities around the world began experimenting with the possibilities. Duke University gave all freshmen an iPod at the beginning of their studies in 2004 'to stimulate creative uses of digital technology in academic and campus life' (2005). Stanford University and the University of California, also in the USA, have made an institutional commitment to podcasting via Apple's iTunes music hub. Here, Apple provides a configurable, front-end, and free of charge, web-based application to the institution which is then used to upload and download podcast content as required (Murphy, 2008). In fact, in 2007 iTunes U was created to manage and distribute educational audio and video content for colleges and universities around the globe. From sharing announcements, distributing lecture notes, handing out course information, doing campus tours, meeting the needs of distance learners, and providing access to experts, podcasts are now being used in creative and wide-ranging ways. And podcasts for language learning are no different. There are simply thousands of language-learning shows available, for all languages and for all proficiency levels, covering a wide range of topics, being updated daily.

### **Language learning podcasts in Japanese higher education**

In Japan, a small number of universities are providing podcasting opportunities for language learners, either as language support or as student-directed initiatives. Kurume University allows students to access a recording studio to produce bilingual shows. Hiroshima University produces an English language podcast, whilst Hokkaido University makes a vodcast available to students. Toyo Gakuen University has recently commenced an English Lounge Podcast, featuring interviews with students about campus life. In each of these cases, podcasting is being used to reach a wider campus audience and to provide news, views and general information.

Despite this growing resource, there is an area of podcasting that is still underutilized. Currently the majority of podcasts, particularly for language learning purposes, are produced for students. Shows are recorded, the content is decided and students need to browse through listings to find material that meets their proficiency level and interests. The idea is that the native speakers provide what the learners need. Richardson (2010) highlights this approach:

There are many ways that teachers can bring the genre (podcasting) into the classroom. World language teachers could record and publish daily practice lessons that students could listen to at home or, if they are fortunate enough, could download to their own MP3 players. (p. 117)

However, there are very few podcasts produced by students. Here, the shows are produced by language learners as a learning activity. This difference is important because it makes podcasting the focus of the classroom and makes students the 'owners' of the content.

### **Podcasting at J. F. Oberlin University**

Three years ago the authors introduced a podcasting course as an elective class in the English Language Program at J. F. Oberlin University. This course, open to first through fourth year students, intends to bring the world of podcasting to students. It is taught by the authors and offered each semester as a way to improve the four skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Rather than harnessing the obviously rich source of linguistic potential that is already available, or providing students with additional online materials, the course instead focuses on students making their own podcasts. During this process, students create, edit and publish written and audio content, and then post their completed shows onto a class website.

One of the key motivating principals behind the course is that the content is 'student-directed'. This means that, whilst the teachers outline the tasks and provide the technical support and language help, the content is actually generated by the students. This allows students to generate the language they need to complete the task rather than being provided with language they may or may not require. They are necessarily exposed to a wider range of language items, both lexical and grammatical. This aligns the classroom methodology with a task-based language teaching (TBLT) approach, an approach that has found many supporters over the past decade (for TBLT, see Ellis, 2003; Willis, 1996; Willis & Willis, 2007).

What is novel about this course is that this is a university accredited course, rather than an extra-curricular or student club activity. Students enter the course as part of their English studies and receive credit based on their performance throughout the course. The authors are not aware of any similar courses offering this approach to podcasting.

### **What is needed to make a podcast?**

The simple answer is: something to say, a means to record what is said and a forum to publish this. The first part of the answer, 'something to say', revolves around the tasks that the students are given (see below for a detailed description of what took place in the class at J. F. Oberlin) and is clearly the most important element of this and any language class. Having students motivated and willing to express themselves in the L2 is the starting point of any successful course. On a more technical level, and dealing with the second part of the answer, you need digital recorders. For a class of twenty, five recorders should be enough: a ratio of one recorder to four students. As much work in the podcasting class is pair or group work, there is no need for a higher ratio, and sharing the devices helps foster interaction and peer support. There is a large range of digital recorders available in terms of cost and quality, but we found M-Audio's Microtrack II to be easy to use, and capable of recording good audio in WAV or MP3 format. If there is no budget for digital recorders, most computers can record voice using internal microphones, although the quality of the audio recording varies. Another option is to utilize students' mobile phones, as most mobile phones now on the market have voice recording capabilities.

Once the audio is recorded, software for editing and perhaps to embellish it with added music, jingles and stingers is needed, to produce a more professional-sounding podcast. In this course students use the Apple software, Garageband, designed for audio editing and

podcasting. It is free on all Macintosh computers and exports audio files in AAC or MP3 formats. Most new computers running with a Windows operating system include Windows Movie Maker, which allows the basic editing of audio files and creates WMA files. Another free option is the cross-platform application Audacity, which can be downloaded free from the Internet, and like Garageband is easy to use and quite flexible. In this podcasting course students have access to three Macintosh laptops that are used in class, and four Macintosh computers in the university's self-access centre. As the main focus of the class is on preparing for the podcast with discussions, writing scripts and pronunciation practice and recording, the time spent editing with the software mentioned above takes up a relatively small amount of time.

Once the recording has been done and the editing completed, the audio files need to be published on the Internet, preferably with the accompanying scripts and any relevant images. The authors registered a domain name ([www.podspres.com/spring10](http://www.podspres.com/spring10)) and used a web-hosting service for a fee of approximately 800 yen a month, which enabled the class to store audio files on the hosting company's server. For a publishing platform, Wordpress, which is free, was used with the plugin, podPress, which generated the RSS feeds to convert the audio files into automatically downloadable podcasts. A free website option would be Google's Blogger site, which allows the posting of blogs onto the internet in combination with Feedburner to generate the RSS feeds. Audio files can also be stored online for free at Ourmedia. Of course, these two options are by no means the only ways to get class' podcasts published on the Internet, but they are both simple and effective options, requiring only a little work to set up. For a more in-depth discussion of how to publish a podcast see J. Van Orden's excellent article, *How to Podcast (2008)*.

### **The elective podcasting course at J. F. Oberlin University**

The elective course, based around creating and publishing podcasts, is now in its third year. Each course runs for one semester, or for fifteen weeks, and there are two 90-minute back-to-back lessons per week.

At J. F. Oberlin University elective courses are given a rating to indicate to students the level of English proficiency required to enroll in the course. Level 1 is a beginner course, Level 2 lower intermediate, and Level 3 is for intermediate students. Podcasting is offered as a Level 2 course. However, this is not a required class, so overall student English proficiency

levels have been mixed. The class size has ranged from ten students to the maximum 25 students.

After getting students comfortable with the microphones, making them authors on the blog site, and allowing them to explore Garageband software, students are ready to work more closely on their language skills. In general the course follows a similar pattern for each of the tasks:

1. Introduction and general guidelines for the task
2. Brainstorming, planning and written preparation
3. Language check, proofreading and pronunciation work
4. Recording
5. Audio editing, re-recording
6. Uploading to the website and adding pictures and text

### Types of tasks

In class, students work mainly in groups and pairs, but sometimes individually, on a variety of tasks with the aim of encouraging expression and communication between the students, and sharing opinions with their family, friends and the wider Internet community. The tasks (see Table 1) are intended to be simpler at the start of the course, when students are still becoming familiar with the technology, and more linguistically and cognitively challenging, when the technology has been mastered. Typical tasks, and approximate times, are presented in Table 1, though any number of topics might be appropriate depending on the proficiency level and interests of the students. Other topics include, 'My Travel Story', 'The Best Day of My Life' and 'Things to Do around Campus'.

Table 1: Example course outline

Task	Grouping	Time Frame
Self introduction	Individual	1 week
Interview	Pair	1-3 weeks
'I Believe' Opinion piece	Individual	2-3 weeks
'What is happiness?' Opinion piece	Individual/Pair	2-3 weeks
Country Spotlight	Small groups	3-4 weeks
Final Exam	Individual	1 week

### **Benefits for students**

In an earlier paper focusing on podcasting in language teaching (Brewster & von Dietze, 2008), the authors listed several pedagogical advantages for foreign language students. It was indicated that podcasts can help:

- Assist auditory learners. Podcasting is perfect for learners who prefer to take in information aurally.
- Improve Reading and Writing. Since many podcasts are supported by a website, students can be guided to transcripts of the show, can provide online comments or take part in quizzes and surveys, all in the target language.
- Provide an opportunity for language learning outside the classroom. Students can listen to their podcasts anywhere.
- Increase exposure to native authentic language. Podcasts give access to real language used in a real setting. This can assist pronunciation and listening skills.
- Broaden IT skills. Students may not know about podcasts, or the wide variety that is available to them. Having their 'own' podcast may lead students to finding other language learning sites.
- Increase motivation. A podcast uses the foreign language as a medium to share information rather than as a linguistic instructional tool per se. Language learning thus becomes a by-product of the podcast.

Now that the course has been running for three years, based on feedback from student surveys and teacher observations it can be said that each of these points has been fulfilled. Moreover, several additional benefits to language learners have been found.

- As the class revolves around creating audio content, students are exposed to not only large amounts of listening material, but they are also involved in researching ideas, writing scripts and reading the scripts of their peers. The process thus engages all four skills.
- Students, as part of their podcasts, are asked to interview native speakers. This process of interviewing and then transcribing spoken language is ideal listening practice, and raises awareness of pace, intonation and accents of native English.
- The frequent recording, editing and re-recording process focuses learners on pronunciation.
- Since students often work with partners or in small groups, the opportunity for peer feedback on scripts and spoken English exists. Moreover, as all the audio files are

available in a central location online, students can access the completed projects of peers.

### **Benefits for teachers**

The work involved in preparing, producing, editing, recording and publishing a podcast has many benefits, but in the language class, teachers are clearly primarily concerned with those that improve the L2 language skills. Obviously the benefits to learners, as already mentioned, are also benefits to teachers. Yet one of the key benefits is that the course breaks down the barrier between students and the teacher. The nature of the tasks allows teachers to move away from the front of the classroom, acting more as a language assistant to the students work.

The class also allows teachers to give ongoing detailed feedback on students' spoken performance. Students are required to prepare scripts prior to commencing recording. Initial editing and preparation guides students to more accurate oral production. As tasks are completed they are then saved to the website. Teachers can review this material at any time and can focus on individual needs to improve students' speaking skills. Areas such as pronunciation, intonation, grammatical knowledge and vocabulary can be reviewed in detail. As the course progresses, students and teachers have access to a growing bank of recorded speaking tasks.

## **Results and feedback**

### **Student survey**

Based on a small survey run over 2009 and 2010 it was found that the vast majority of students believed that the course had had a beneficial impact on their English language skills (see Table 2).

Firstly, twenty-six of the thirty-one students found that recording podcasts improved their pronunciation. In the course, students are asked to produce podcasts in a variety of formats (monologues, interviews, discussions) on student-generated topics. The general procedure is for students to discuss the topic, prepare a written plan or script, that is monitored and checked by the instructor, and then to practice the pronunciation several times before recording. This part of the process affords learners with a great chance to focus not only on particularly difficult phonemes for Japanese learners, such as the /l+/r/ and /th+/s/

distinctions, but perhaps more importantly on the suprasegmental elements of tone, stress and intonation. Not only was there ample chance for practice, but learners could listen to their own recording and delete audio that they were unhappy with. They could also use the audio software to edit out any false starts, mispronunciations, and other errors.

Table 2: Post-Course Online Survey (31 respondents)

	Yes (はい)	A Little (少し)	No (いいえ)
Did recording podcasts help with your English pronunciation? ポッドキャストで録音することはあなたの英語の発音に役立ちましたか。	26	5	0
Do you think your English improved because of the course? この授業は英語の勉強に役立ちましたか。	30	1	0
When working with classmates, did you use English? クラスメートといっしょに勉強したとき英語を使用しましたか。	21	10	0

Secondly, all but one of the thirty-one respondents believed their English skills improved over the course. As has already been mentioned there was a lot of time given to four-skill language practice during the production of the podcasts. Pair and group work generated topics but also gave valuable interaction opportunities for negotiation of meaning, while the preparing of written scripts focused students' minds on the accuracy of their grammar as well as the naturalness of their expression.

The final response considered in Table 2 deals with what language was used with classmates when working on class tasks. Even here, over two thirds said that they were using the target language. This positive response was especially pleasing to the authors, who had been worried that the large amount of technology learning may force students into using their L1. While it is fair to assume that the learners were perhaps 'generous' in their assessment of their English language use, the absence of any 'no' responses surely points to the fact that the technology did not get in the way of L2 learning. Moreover, and importantly, students felt they had control over the direction and content of the course. They could choose their own topics, conducted their own research and were ultimately responsible for the final product that they uploaded onto the website. The content becomes much more likely to be of relevance to the students.

Beyond the results of the class survey, the authors found that the nature of the tasks, requiring students to work in small groups, share equipment, plan and discuss their work, and work individually on recording and scripts, allowed the teaching to be less class fronted and much more responsive to the individual needs of the students as they worked their way

through the process of producing their podcasts. The students became much more involved in the management of the tasks, freeing the teacher to leave the blackboard so to speak and join the students. This in turn empowered the students, and made them more aware both of what they needed to focus on with regards to their language goals and in managing their time effectively.

## Conclusion

The use of recording equipment and editing software to create podcasts is going to continue to rise in the foreseeable future. Not only is the equipment easy to use and readily available, but new technology is being embraced by more and more people across the globe. It is up to teachers to recognize this potential and to develop programs that meet the learning needs of today's students. To do this, robust faculty development initiatives need to be created and school and college administrators need to support the teaching faculty with adequate and relevant resources. As Richardson indicates, 'the coming years will be marked by a flood of new innovations and ideas in teaching, most born from the idea that we can now publish and interact in ways never before possible' (2010, p. 155). This is good news for education.

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