

Student Attitudes Toward English Podcasts Hosted by Native English Speakers vs. Non-native English Speakers

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Podcasts are a useful tool in the English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom that allow second language (L2) learners to improve more than just listening skills. Kanazawa Institute of Technology produces a variety of English language podcasts hosted by both native English speakers and native Japanese speakers. This paper will describe a study in which Japanese college students, over the course of a semester, listened to podcasts hosted by native English speakers and native Japanese speakers. The authors will discuss their findings in regards to whether or not students preferred one type of podcast over the other, as well as how factors such as episode topic, British English, and American English affected student attitudes.

Keywords: podcast, technology, listening

1. Introduction

This paper will describe a study that required students to repeatedly listen to two kinds of podcast over the course of a semester—one podcast that was produced by the authors, a native English speaker from England and a native English speaker from the United States, and podcasts that were produced by native Japanese students at Kanazawa Institute of Technology (KIT). The goal of this study was to determine whether there was a perceptible difference in which kind of podcast the students preferred listening to. The authors were also interested in exploring student attitudes toward British versus American English, and whether the topic of the podcast episode affected student enjoyment.

Podcasts are a form of audio media that can be defined as “an episodic series of spoken word digital audio files that a user can download to a personal device for easy listening. Streaming applications and podcasting services provide a convenient and integrated way to manage a personal consumption queue across many podcast sources and playback devices (Wikipedia 2021)”¹⁾. As podcasts have grown in popularity, educators have recognized them as a valuable tool for learning. According to O’Bryan and Hegelheimer, “Educational podcasts are becoming increasingly common on college and university campuses in the United States, and the most popular use of these podcasts seems to be for delivery of recorded lectures or speeches (O’Bryan and Hegelheimer 2007)”²⁾. Likewise, language teachers have also realized that podcasts can be particularly useful for second language learners. As O’Bryan and Hegelheimer further explain, “Many available ESL podcasts are produced by language teachers or native English speakers...and focus on understanding real speech (in the form of scripted dialogues, interviews, news stories and academic lectures), pronunciation and grammatical constructs, or more entertaining forms of speech such as

songs or poems. Many of these podcasts contain printable transcripts for students to read as they follow along with the audio. Often, the hosts of these podcasts will speak at slower rates of speech than normal...’’²⁾.

Another important attribute of podcasts is that they can be easily accessed outside of the classroom, especially in the context of extensive listening practice. Camelia, Aditya, and Ridwan posit that “Podcasts are a useful source for enhanced listening skills, especially when students listen extensively outside the classroom...it can increase their English vocabulary and make them familiar with speakers’ different voices; hence, students’ fluency increases (Camelia et al. 2021)’’³⁾.

When used as described above, podcasts can help students improve their listening skills. However, the benefits of using podcasts in the ESL classroom are much broader: “They help to develop several skills at a time: listening, reading (podcasts often transcripts). Podcasts also influence writing and speaking. Students who listen to podcasts can imitate the manner and intonation the native speakers have. In addition, podcasts provide knowledge on culture, traditions (Chaikovska 2018)’’⁴⁾.

On top of that, when students produce their own podcasts in the target language, their speaking skills improve and their motivation increases. As Sze explains, “Podcasts, once placed on the Web, can be accessed by anyone around the world. This means that for students producing their own podcasts, there is a real audience out there. This is a huge motivating factor...Furthermore, the production of podcasts provides students with plenty of meaningful language use, which is highly desirable for second language acquisition (Sze 2006)’’⁵⁾.

English podcasts have been a staple at KIT since the KIT English Podcast was started in 2013, and various other podcasts were started subsequently, including the KIT Music Podcast and the English Podcast Series, which were both launched in 2015. While the KIT English Podcast and the KIT Music Podcast are hosted by native English speakers, podcasts that are part of the English Podcast series are hosted by native Japanese speakers (students at KIT). Several papers have described how these podcasts have been used and received by students, and the general conclusions have been that students don’t have a high awareness of podcasts in general, but they enjoy listening to them and producing them themselves (Bean 2016, Bean 2017, Bean and Whittinghill 2018)^{6),7),8)}.

Although a fair amount of research has been conducted to examine podcast use at KIT, one area that has not been studied is whether students prefer listening to podcasts hosted by native English speakers or podcasts hosted by native Japanese speakers. The authors theorized that while students may appreciate listening to podcasts hosted by native English speakers because it would give them the chance to hear natural language and pronunciation, they also might find podcasts hosted by their fellow native Japanese speakers to be novel, interesting, and motivating. This paper will focus on answering that question, while also considering other aspects such as the role episode topics played in student attitude, as well as how students felt about hearing British English versus American English.

1.1 KIT English Podcast and the English Podcast Series

For this study, students were required to listen to both the KIT English Podcast and podcasts that are part of the English Podcast Series.

The KIT English Podcast is a weekly podcast that is hosted by the authors of this paper, one who speaks British English and one who speaks American English. This podcast was started in 2013 and currently contains a library of more than 240 episodes that students can access online. Episodes are typically about ten minutes long and consist of three segments: small talk, discussion of a weekly topic, and “Vocabulary Corner,” which introduces differences between British and American English.

The English Podcast Series is an Honors Program project that is open to all students who are interested in improving their English speaking skills. The stated objective of the project is help students improve their ability to talk about the things they are interested in using English. Typically, students work in groups to choose a broad theme they want their podcast to be about, and then each episode explores a topic within that theme. For example, if students choose music as the theme, each episode could introduce one of their favorite artists. If they choose movies as the theme, each episode may discuss and review one of their favorite movies. Although this project is currently suspended due to COVID-19, a library of 19 different podcasts that total nearly 200 episodes is available for students to use as a listening resource.

2. Method

2.1 Subjects

Approximately 500 students participated in this study. They were low-intermediate English speakers taking a required, four-skills English course at KIT. Almost all participants were freshmen and sophomores.

2.2 Tasks

Students were required to listen to eight individual podcast episodes that were assigned by their teacher—four episodes of the KIT English Podcast, and four episodes selected from the English Podcast Series library. Episodes were chosen based on responses to the pre-project survey that elicited which topics students were interested in.

Students listened to one episode each week for eight weeks. After listening, students completed a podcast report on Moodle to test their listening comprehension. (See Appendix 1 for a sample podcast report). Students received 1% of their total grade for each completed report and were required to answer 60% of the questions correctly in order to receive credit.

Following each episode, students completed a brief survey on Google Forms to gauge their reaction to the episode. Each survey asked the following six questions:

1. Did you listen to the entire episode?
2. Was this episode interesting?
3. Do you want to listen to more episodes about this topic?
4. Was this episode difficult to understand?
5. Was the length of this episode good?
6. Do you have any other comments about this episode?

At the end of the project, students also completed a post-project survey in order to provide wider insights into their attitudes toward the project as a whole. The results of both the pre-project survey

and the post-project survey will be detailed in the following section of this paper.

3. Results & Discussion

As mentioned above, all students were given a pre-project survey to gauge their knowledge of and attitudes toward podcasts. An important aim of the pre-survey was to discover the topics students would be most interested in listening to. The answers to this question informed which topics were discussed in the subsequent episodes of the KIT English Podcast, which were made in real time, and which pre-existing episodes were chosen from the English Podcast Series catalogue. The survey also asked students to self-assess their strongest and weakest English skill. Then, following each homework activity in which students were required to listen to a podcast, they were given the surveys designed to assess their opinions of individual podcast episodes. Finally, they were given an overarching post-project survey which sought their reflections on the podcasts as a whole.

3.1 Pre-project survey

Of the 499 respondents, only 27.1% knew what a podcast was and just 15.4% had ever listened to a podcast in a foreign language. More significantly, only 2.4% answered that they currently listen to podcasts; however, 51.7% showed an interest in doing so. Interestingly, the majority of those who do actively listen to podcasts commented that their motivation for doing so was to improve their English language skills. For example, “I want to acquire English listening skills” and “I want to study English” were frequent responses (all quotes translated from Japanese). This suggests a small number of students had already realized the potential benefits of listening to natural English speech (it is likely they are referring to native speakers, however there is no data to support this assumption).

Respondents were asked to rank the topics they are most interested in listening to, with the top six being (in order); music, movies, sports, news, science, and ‘my teacher.’ These results were taken into account when deciding which podcast episodes were assigned; subjects from both ends of the popularity scale were chosen.

Finally, when asked to identify their strongest and weakest English skills, 22.4% selected listening as their strongest skill, while 28.3% considered listening to be their weakest skill. This suggests a good spread of perceived abilities and improved the validity of subsequent responses throughout the study.

3.2 Individual episode surveys

A series of surveys were given to students following each homework activity as outlined in the Methods section. The number of responses to each survey varied, however each survey received over 400 responses. In each case, over 90% of respondents claimed to have listened to the whole episode, and over 80% claimed to have found the episode interesting or very interesting.

Interestingly, students were divided almost exactly 50:50 when asked whether the podcasts made by native speakers were easy to understand, but results indicate that they found the student-produced podcasts slightly easier to understand, with around 60% of respondents choosing ‘easy’ or ‘very easy.’ The reasons for this are unclear, although comments regarding the native speaker

podcasts such as “Please talk slowly. Too fast” and “Please be able to change the playback speed” suggest the pace of the native English speakers’ speech may have been challenging for some students. However, the ease of listening responses did not tally with the post-project survey, in which respondents rate the native-speaker podcast more highly than the student-produced podcast in terms of how easy they were to understand. It may be that respondents welcomed the opportunity to listen to native English speakers even though it was more challenging.

In terms of episode length, all responses were favorable. That said, the student-produced podcasts were generally shorter in length and received around 10% more responses of ‘perfect,’ which supports previous findings that 5 to 7.5 minutes is the optimum podcast length⁷⁾.

3.3 Post-project survey

The most revealing data was elicited from the post-project survey. Primarily, among the 432 respondents, there was an almost unanimous agreement (95.4%) that listening to podcasts is good for improving listening skills. Furthermore, 94.4% of respondents enjoyed listening to the podcasts, with several comments suggesting that hearing stories from native English speaking presenters was of particular interest. For example, “It was interesting to know foreign cultures” and “It was refreshing because it was my first time to hear conversations between native speakers.” This suggests an interest in learning about other cultures as well as simply improving language skills.

Although there were favorable comments regarding the student-produced podcasts, the podcasts made by the native English speakers were unequivocally preferred, with 83.3% of respondents favoring them. The reasons given were not generally based on the episode topic, but were instead more practical, with comments suggesting that native English speakers’ superior pronunciation, the unrehearsed, natural conversation style, and overall fluency make those episodes more enjoyable. Concurrently, criticisms of the non-native speakers’ podcasts were centered around pronunciation difficulty (“I want you to make your pronunciation a little more beautiful”), a lack of planning (“I think it's important to listen to the students' pronunciation. However, I want you to stop the podcast that is ugly due to lack of practice. I don't know what I'm spending my time on.”), and difficulty in differentiating the speakers’ voices (“There were many people and it was difficult to sort out who spoke”).

Despite these complaints, it was interesting to note that the students’ Japanese-English was also a factor in respondents’ enjoyment of the student-led podcasts, with one respondent saying “Podcasts made by KIT students were easy to understand because it was Japanese English,” while another suggested “I like both, but the conversation between the students made me feel more intimate.” This suggests that while the native-speaker podcasts were overwhelmingly favored, there is a benefit to students in hearing non-native speakers of their own nationality. Indeed, one respondent suggested they make a useful benchmark for their own progress (“I would like to listen to the pronunciation of university students and use it as a reference”), while another made an interesting observation noting that the age of the speakers was a factor in enjoying listening to podcasts (“To hear people of the same age talking in English will motivate you to learn English”). These ideas are also reflected in the fact that 59.7% of respondents indicated that they would like to continue listening to podcasts made by non-native speakers.

Although there were no questions in the post-project survey that explicitly asked about American English versus British English, there is a section of the native-speaker podcast focused on the differences between the two Englishes, and this was referred to on several occasions in respondents' comments. These included "It was interesting to know the difference between American and British languages and different cultures!," "I was able to know different English expressions in the United States and the United Kingdom," and "I was able to know the difference between English words in the United States and the United Kingdom." Unless they have studied abroad in England, this is the first time KIT students have been exposed to British English in an academic setting, as no British teacher has previously worked here. As such, this unexpected result is particularly revealing and suggests that the 'Vocabulary Corner' segment of the KIT English Podcast is worthwhile and interesting to students.

It is encouraging to note that 85.9% of respondents answered that they are now more interested in listening to English podcasts in the future, with some even starting to engage with English language media, with comments such as 'I started listening to podcasts of overseas celebrities' and 'I've been listening to Ted Talk in the morning.' Supporting this further, 88.4% of respondents suggested that they would like to continue listening to the native-speaker KIT English Podcast, something which is ongoing and certainly available to them. This is in contrast to the pre-project survey, in which only 51.7% of respondents indicated they were interested in listening to podcasts of any kind (see figures 1 & 2 for a comparison).

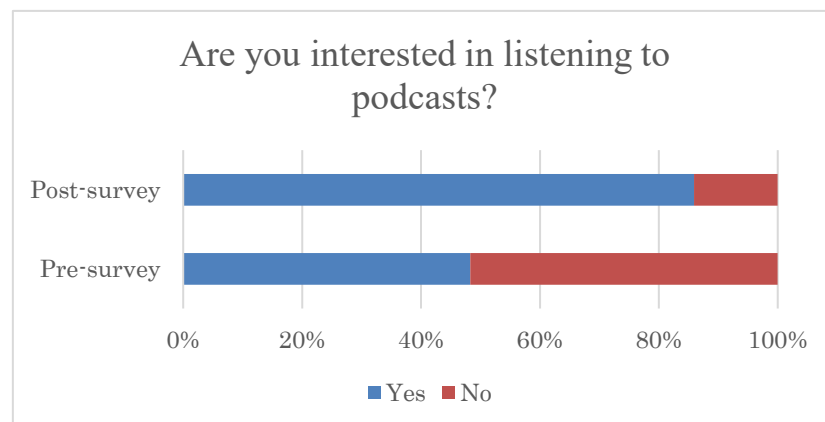


Fig.1 Pre- and post-project survey question: Are you interested in listening to podcasts?

In terms of episode length, shorter episodes were favored. On average, student-led podcasts were shorter than the native-speaker versions, although the native language (L1) of the hosts did not seem to factor into respondents' reasons for preferring shorter episodes. The most frequently occurring reason given for shorter episodes being preferable instead lay in the listeners own ability to concentrate, with comments such as "I felt that I couldn't keep my concentration if it was too long," "If it's too long, you'll get bored," and "If you exceed 5 minutes, you will lose your concentration." This aligns with the findings of previous research⁷⁾.

Finally, the topic of the episode did not have a great impact on respondents' attitudes toward the

podcasts. The most popular topic was sports (made by native speakers), with 22.2% of the 432 responses, while the least popular was music (made by students) with 8.6%. When viewed graphically (see Figure 2.) it is clear that there is a fairly even spread among all the topics, so it is possible to discount this as a major factor in respondents’ enjoyment of the podcasts.

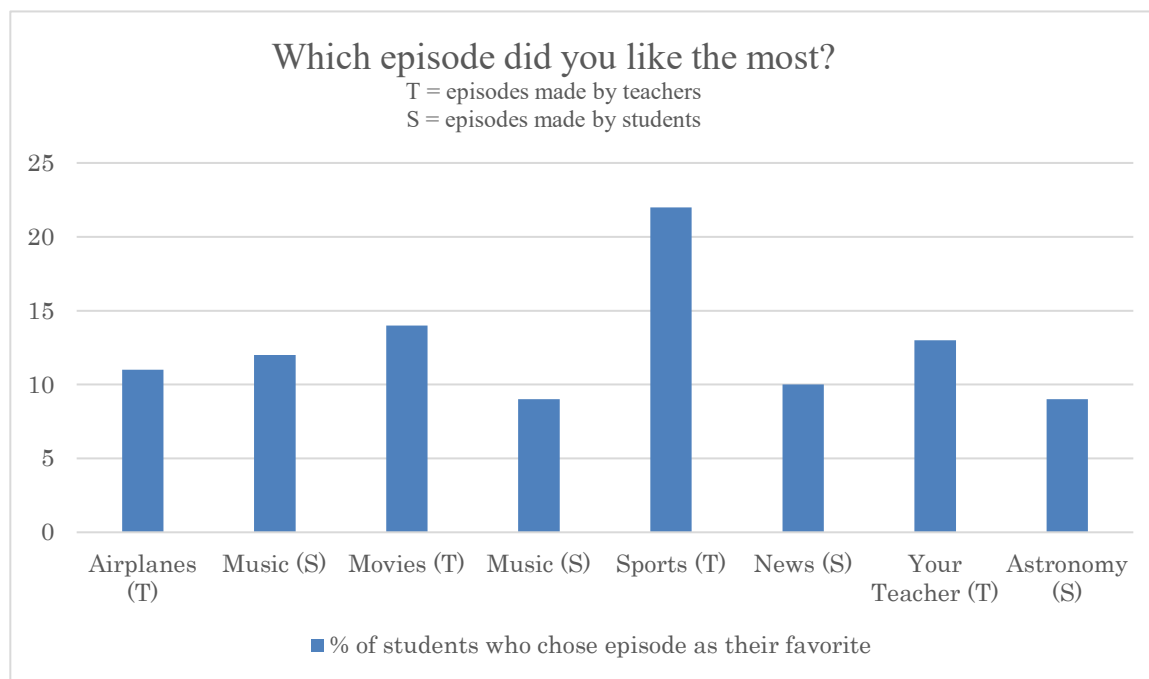


Fig.2 Post-project survey question: Which episode did you like the most?

4. Conclusion

This research was conducted with the anticipation that students would respond more favorably toward native English speakers and rate their podcasts more highly than those of Japanese speakers of English. While the results of this study do support this hypothesis, the reasons were more varied than expected.

It was not surprising that the voices of professional teachers speaking fluently in their native language were preferred by L2 learners of English. Over 30 years of combined teaching experience means the ability to grade language and pace speech is now second nature, and while some students clearly struggled with following a natural conversation, the vast majority enjoyed the unrehearsed style and found it beneficial to their language development. In addition, the respondents indicated that they enjoyed learning more about their teachers. The candid nature of the discussions, and the peek behind the curtain of formality normally associated with a student-teacher relationship proved to be an enticing draw to hold listeners’ attention. They also mentioned that they enjoyed learning more about culture in the United States and the United Kingdom, something that is more difficult to recreate with the student-produced podcasts.

Perhaps more interestingly, the positive responses toward the student-produced podcast were based on shared understanding, both of topic and language difficulty, and age, which had not

previously been considered as a factor, but warrants further investigation. As expected, criticisms of student-produced podcasts centered around the hosts' imperfect pronunciation. It should be noted that some of the student-produced podcasts featured four speakers, while the native-speaker podcasts only used two speakers, which makes the student-produced podcasts inherently more challenging to follow. A repeated criticism of the student-produced podcasts was that it was difficult to differentiate between speakers, particularly when all four were of the same gender. This is likely because of the intonation of the speakers, which is less expressive due to their reading from a script rather than engaging in a natural conversation. Because of this finding, a more focused effort will be made on improving pronunciation when making student-produced podcasts.

An unexpected finding from this study was the number of responses indicating that learning the differences between American English and British English was of particular interest. This could be interpreted on a superficial level as an amusing novelty, a quirk of the contrasting Englishes spoken by the two native English speaking presenters. However, the differences are a genuine concern when dealing with L2 learners. As Bobdanoted, while it is entirely possible to simultaneously understand the English of an American or a Brit, where there are differences can cause "confusion, embarrassment, or sheer incomprehension"⁹⁾. This may be acceptable on a lexical level, but where there are grammatical or meaning differences, it can become troublesome. English is the international Lingua Franca, and there is an ongoing debate around which English to teach in the classroom (e.g. Seidlhofer, 2021)¹⁰⁾. However, it is not as simple as American or British, as there are many more nations who speak English as a first language. For L2 learners of English, it would be advantageous to have exposure to a range of Englishes. Therefore, a future study could investigate the efficacy of podcasts featuring L1 English presenters from different nations.

Other changes that could benefit future research could be to assign podcasts that have the same number of hosts; differentiating between speakers was an issue where four hosts were involved. Using native speakers closer to the students' age may help to reduce external factors such as age-related cultural knowledge or attitudes, although this would negate the expertise teachers bring in modifying their language to make it more easily digestible for listeners. Finally, limiting the length of the podcasts to 5-7 minutes could also improve the validity of any future study.

In summary, while a majority of students found listening to both kinds of podcast enjoyable and beneficial, it was found that students preferred podcasts made by native English speakers. The main reasons for this were the clarity of pronunciation, the improvement of listening skills, learning about their teachers, and learning the differences between American English and British English.

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Appendix 1 – Sample Podcast Report

1. What good will Haruki cook for Christmas?
 - a. Sukiyaki
 - b. Christmas cake
 - c. Fried Chicken
 - d. Soba
2. What does Kana want for Christmas?
 - a. A guitar
 - b. A motorcycle
 - c. A telescope
 - d. Santa Claus
3. The moon is moving away from earth. How far does it move every year?
 - a. A few centimeters
 - b. A few millimeters
 - c. A few meters
 - d. A few kilometers
4. Where do people see a man's face on the surface of the moon?
 - a. In America
 - b. In China
 - c. In southern Europe
 - d. In northern Europe
5. How long does it take to go from earth to the moon?
 - a. 3 days
 - b. 1 day
 - c. 2 days
 - d. 4 days

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