

Development of Podcasts to Enhance Foundation English Proficiency of Undergraduates at Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University

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Abstract

English language teachers often look for new and fun ways to teach their students. Podcasts are a great option for them as these are digital audio episodes which can be downloaded onto a device and listened to by students at their convenience, albeit being still quite new in Thailand. This study aimed to 1) develop podcasts to enhance the grasp of Foundation English among undergraduates and 2) examine the learning behaviour of the undergraduates in using the podcasts. A sample for efficiency testing comprising 30 first-year students at Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University in the Nonthaburi Province of Thailand was obtained through simple random sampling. The research tools comprised (1) 8 English language podcast lessons, (2) English grammar exercises in a student's guidebook, (3) an achievement post-test, and (4) a questionnaire on the students' language learning behaviour. The statistics used were E_1/E_2 , frequencies, and percentages. The research found that the podcast lessons and student's guidebook were efficient at 80.09/81.75, according to the set efficiency criterion of 80/80. Of all the students, 60% enjoyed listening to the podcasts before bedtime, 63.3% could listen to the podcasts for about 30 minutes, 55.2% could listen more than twice to the same podcast, and the most popular podcast lesson was based on the movie, Titanic.

Keywords: *behaviour, efficiency criterion, english proficiency, open university, podcasts, undergraduates,*

Introduction

In the current era, the English language is very important in nearly every corner of the world. It is the main language in commerce, education, and international communication; furthermore, many countries have adopted it as their official language, chosen second language or foreign language of communication.

In Thailand, although English is used only as a foreign language, it plays an important role in education as English has been a part of the curriculum from primary to secondary

school for many decades. Teachers have been emphasising the efficient and successful teaching and learning of English at both the basic and higher education levels. However, the main issue for Thai students is that although they learn English as a foreign language in school from the basic education level, many of them are unable to communicate fluently in English with foreigners. Therefore, teachers need to look for more efficient ways of teaching English so that their students can practise and improve their command of the language in a proper way.

Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University (STOU) was the first university in Southeast Asia to use the distance learning system. It aims to be a world-class open university utilising the distance education system to provide lifelong learning for all. The main teaching materials are textbooks and elective course blocks for each subject in a programme. Each course block contains 15 units, and students are expected to study at the pace of one unit per week in a 15-week semester. English for communication is one of the general education subjects that all undergraduates must undertake. The learning materials for this subject includes both textbooks and supplementary audio-visual materials. E-learning and tutorial classes are provided as well to enhance the students' English language skills. Some students face difficulty in learning the subject as they have trouble focusing or they rely on textbooks alone. Therefore, it would be useful to provide them with a fun way to learn the language at their own pace and convenience and in a comfortable atmosphere.

It is common in the present era for people to multitask, performing several activities at once, such as listening to audio materials while commuting, working, cooking, cleaning, showering or doing other activities. According to Locker (2018, p. 1), podcasts have rapidly risen in popularity in recent years. As an example, there were a total of 7 billion Apple podcast downloads in 2014, 10.5 billion in 2016, and 13.7 billion in 2018. In March 2018, Apple podcasts jumped to 50 billion total podcast downloads and streams. Podcasts are now available in more than 155 countries, with at least 525,000 active podcast shows and over 18.5 million episodes. Apart from listening for leisure, podcasts can be used to support learning, especially language learning. Thorne and Payne (2013) stated that podcasts offered language learners samples of real language and authentic materials while Stanley (2005) mentioned that students could use podcasts to supplement their textbook materials.

In recent times, higher education has increasingly adopted podcasts for lectures (e.g., iTunes U), which has had a positive impact on college students' performance in exams (McKinney et al., 2009). Podcasts present a way of learning beyond the textbook-dominant curriculum. A few studies have shown that podcasts could improve students' learning ability, for example, a research entitled "Podcast: An Alternative Way to Improve English as a Foreign Language (EFL) Students' Listening and Speaking Performance" by Yoestara and Putri (2019). A study on "The Impact of Podcasts on EFL Students' Listening Comprehension" found that podcasts could bring a lot of benefits in teaching listening and speaking to EFL learners (Abdulrahman et al., 2018). Meanwhile, Aditya (2018) stated that podcasts could attract the interest of students, even those who have trouble with the language and are uninterested in learning it. As a result, podcasts have been designed and developed to provide English language lessons.

Literature Review

Defining Podcast

Oxford (2007) stated that the term "podcast" is a combination of the terms "pod" (from Apple iPod) and "broadcast". However, the term is no longer limited to broadcasts involving iPods and can also refer to the use of any portable audio player which allows the user to

download sound files from the internet (Educause, 2007). According to Walch and Lafferty (2006), podcasts are a series of digital audio and video recordings which are uploaded onto the web with the aid of Rapid Simple Syndication (RSS) feeds. These feeds allow listeners to download their favourite podcasts using pod catcher software. Audio podcasts require less time and fewer techniques to produce than video podcasts. In addition, people can listen to audio podcasts while working or performing other activities such as driving or exercising while videos require their full attention in watching and listening.

Using Podcasts in Teaching and Learning

Podcasts allow people to listen anywhere anytime to the things they find interesting. They just have to download the podcasts onto their smartphone, notebook or tablet. For students, this provides them with access to learning resources regardless of time and location. Podcasts have become a part of teaching and learning around the world. For instance, in the United States, podcasts are used extensively at universities such as Stanford University and Duke University. In the United Kingdom, a Bradford University lecturer has completely replaced face-to-face lectures with podcasts. Meanwhile in Australia, podcasting initiatives, like other forms of mobile learning, are in a state of fragmentation but interest is growing, particularly in higher education (Nataatmadja & Dyson, 2008). In Asia, Chan et al. (2011) mentioned that a university in Singapore designed EFL podcasts to supplement classroom instruction for Chinese and Korean students. According to Rosell-Aguilar (2007), podcast technology is strongly connected to the constructivist learning approach, whereby students construct knowledge through active exploration, observation, processing, and interpretation. At present, students can access podcasts through web delivery and e-learning systems which are available at most universities.

Podcasts and Language Teaching and Learning

As podcasts enable students to access educational materials and resources anywhere, for instance at home, at work or while travelling to university, and while doing other activities, these are suitable for use in learning a language.

According to various researchers and educators, besides university materials, language learners can learn through podcasts in various channels. For example, Thorne and Payne (2013) stated that podcasts offered language learners samples of real language and authentic materials. Istanto (2011) and Lee and Chan (2007) mentioned that podcasts could be used as supporting materials along with course materials to develop students' proficiency in English as traditional classrooms did not give more importance to listening activities. Asmara (2017) suggested that podcasts might become an alternative solution for both teachers and students in dealing with common problems in listening comprehension. Bustari et al. (2017) presented in their study that podcast media could be used as alternative media in teaching English, especially speaking skills in EFL classes. Borgia (2010) showed that podcasts could greatly reinforce students' vocabulary learning. Similarly, the findings of Putman and Kingsley's study (2009) also supported the notion that podcasts as a learning tool could greatly help students to improve their vocabulary. Meanwhile, Edirisingha et al. (2007) showed the advantages of using podcasts for a first-year undergraduate module on English language and communication at Kingston University in the United Kingdom: the podcasts supported students' preparation for assessed work, provided valuable advice on portfolio and presentations, and helped the students in preparing for workshops and seminars.

Teachers must pay attention to length and style, and consider their students and subjects, in making podcasts. According to Chan et al. (2006), a podcast should take up approximately five minutes, which is roughly the length of a typical song, while Cosimini et al. (2017) revealed that a survey of learners found that they preferred podcasts of 5 to 15

minutes and a study of medical students reported that 15 to 20 minutes was the optimal length. Meanwhile, Stephens (2007) recommended that teachers create podcasts in accordance with their learners' preferences.

Research Objectives

This study has two research objectives, which are as follows:

- to develop English language podcast lessons to enhance the grasp of Foundation English among STOU undergraduates; and
- to examine the learning behaviour of the undergraduates in studying Foundation English through podcasts

Research Method

Research Design

This is a research and development study with one group of research sample.

It is focused on not only providing English language lessons through podcasts but also employed a distance learning package in order to make the lessons more effective and enable students to learn on their own and at their convenience. Such a distance learning package should consist of a standard textbook, other written materials, and comprehensive study guides (Bhrammawong, 2000). Therefore, exercises, examples, and self-assessment questions with sample answers were included in the package. The podcast lessons replaced the standard textbook. Content on how to produce the podcasts in terms of topics, format, length, and style was studied. Excerpts from popular movies were used to make the lessons interesting and provide conversations which were easy to learn and understand. A student's guidebook along with exercises which included short conversations from the movies was developed and given to the students to learn by themselves with a little effort.

After the lessons were developed, their efficiency and the students' learning behaviour were investigated.

Population and Participants

The population of this research comprised 10,130 undergraduates at STOU in the academic year of 2019, but the sample for efficiency testing comprised 30 first-year students. Podcast English lessons were used with samples of students in three stages: (1) individual testing with 3 students (above average, average, and poor learners); (2) small group testing with 6 students, and (3) field testing with 30 students found through simple random sampling. The results of the three try-out stages were expected to lead to the improvement of the e-learning package in order to meet the criterion specified for E_1/E_2 .

Research Instruments

The research tools comprised (1) 8 podcast English lessons, (2) exercises in a student's guidebook, (3) an achievement post-test, and (4) podcast questionnaire on English language learning behaviour.

Data Collection

The data collection process consisted of three stages.

First Stage: Study

- i. Podcast English teaching and learning programmes and relevant researches on the use of podcasts to teach English were studied.
- ii. The content of English language lessons for undergraduates was studied. Important language structures, grammar, and some basic phrases and sentences were selected. These included greetings and small talk, tenses (present simple, past simple, present continuous, and simple future – will), modal auxiliary verbs, adverbs of frequency, “used to”, comparatives, superlatives, questions (wh-questions, yes-no questions, and question tags), requests, offers, suggestions, and “if” clauses.
- iii. Content on how to select movies for English language teaching and learning and lists of movies recommended in websites for the learning of English were studied. Movies with simple plots were selected so that students could focus more on the language.
- iv. All the movies were watched in detail in order to study the conversations and select those which matched the English language structure content.

Second Stage: Development

- i. Eight podcast lessons of 15 to 20 minutes were developed, each based on a movie. The language level matched the students’ level of language proficiency. Each podcast had a synopsis and dialogue from a movie. The movie dialogue was very close to what people would hear in daily life if they conversed with native speakers of the English language. Table 1 lists the eight podcast lessons.

Table 1

Movies and English Language Structures in Podcast Lessons

Movies	English Language Structures
Episode 1. The Holiday	Greetings and small talk
Episode 2. The Intern	Past and present simple tense
Episode 3. Me Before You	Adverbs of frequency
Episode 4. 50 First Dates	Modal auxiliary verbs and present continuous tense
Episode 5. Titanic	“Used to”, comparatives, superlatives, simple future tense (will)
Episode 6. The Devil Wears Prada	Questions (wh- questions, yes-no questions, and question tags)
Episode 7. Joker	Requesting, offering, and making suggestions
Episode 8. You’ve Got Mail	“If” clauses

- ii. The lessons contained dialogues from the movies. Each lesson, or episode, was presented by a host who is an English language teacher. It began with an opening music jingle and sound effects. Then, the host would greet the audience, state the episode’s name, title or number, and his or her name. The host would suggest the study method and introduce the movie by giving the synopsis. Next, the host would present a brief dialogue from the movie and explain the scene along with the conversation and language structure. The host would present 3 to 4 brief dialogues from the movie. He or she would end the episode by giving a summary, reminding

students to do the exercises in the student's guidebook. The host would employ a light tone, keep things simple, and explain important grammar points slowly and clearly.

- iii. Student's guidebook, which comprised objectives, studying method, movie dialogues, exercises, and answers were developed, followed by an achievement test, which is an important tool for evaluating and measuring instructional progress. It had 25 questions according to the objectives stated in the student's guidebook.
- iv. Next, a questionnaire on students' learning behaviour was developed.
- v. The podcast lessons, student's guidebook, questionnaire, and achievement test were examined by three experts. The test was assessed for content validity by using the Index of Item Objective Congruence of 0.67-1.00. Then, it was revised and sent to other undergraduates who were not samples of the study. The research tools, which included four multiple-choice achievement tests of 25 questions each, were evaluated and found to have a degree of difficulty value (P) between 0.45 and 0.80, a degree of discrimination (r) of between 0.32 and 0.87, and a reliability coefficient of 0.72.

Third Stage: Try-out

The third stage consisted of (1) individual testing, (2) small group testing, and (3) field testing.

- i. Individual tests were conducted with three first-year students who possessed different levels of English proficiency (above average, average, and poor, based on their English language test scores). They were selected through the purposive sampling method and were not part of the study sample. The students were asked to listen to the podcast English lessons, study, do the exercises, practise, and do the achievement test. Their feedback was obtained and the research tools were revised accordingly.
- ii. A small group test was conducted with six students who possessed different levels of English language proficiency selected through the random sampling method and were not participants in the study. The same procedure was conducted for this group.
- iii. A field test was conducted with 30 first-year students with different English proficiency levels selected through the random sampling method. A meeting was held at the university to explain the study method and the learning instruction with podcast. A chat group was created on the Line application and all 30 students were invited. Each podcast was published weekly in the chat group. The students could ask questions and express personal opinions in the chat group anytime they wished. After 8 weeks, they sat for the achievement test. The results of the three tryout stages were expected to lead to the improvement of the lessons in order to meet the E1/E2 criterion.
- iv. The students were asked to fill in a questionnaire on their learning behaviour, i.e., frequency of using the podcasts, the places where they liked to study, the equipment they used (desktop computer, smartphone, tablet), and their favourite lesson.

Data Analysis

The data obtained from the development and efficiency verification of the eight English language podcast lessons, and data on the undergraduates' learning behaviour with the podcasts were analysed using the E_1/E_2 index, frequencies, and percentages.

Findings and Discussion

The results of the research study will be discussed as follows:

Development and efficiency verification of the podcast English lessons for STOU undergraduates

For the purpose of this research, eight podcast English language lessons were developed based on eight popular movies. Movie dialogues which matched the language structures that needed to be taught were included in the podcasts. The research also included a student's guidebook which contained the objectives, study method, movie dialogues, exercises, answers, and an achievement test. The efficiency verification of the English lessons through podcasts is shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Results of Efficiency Verification of Podcast English Lessons

Part	1st verification (n = 3)	2nd verification (n = 6)	3rd verification
	E ₁ /E ₂	E ₁ /E ₂	(n = 30) E ₁ /E ₂
Mean	77.58/79.00	79.88/80.67	80.09/81.75

As can be seen in Table 2, the lessons became increasingly efficient as they were revised based on input from the experts and feedback from the individual and small group tests. The individual tests revealed that some exercises and questions in the post test were too easy for the students, so these were revised accordingly.

For the second verification, the small group test was studied and it was found that the lessons were efficient. However, there were requests from students to modify some vocabulary, conversations, and exercises.

The third verification showed the lessons to be highly efficient at 80.09/81.75. According to Bhrammawong (2000), efficiency based on the 80/80 efficiency criterion, and + 2.5 were accepted.

Since STOU undergraduates learn mainly from textbooks, additional learning tools would greatly benefit them. For example, they could listen to podcasts at their convenience. Those with movie content could be of greater appeal to them. As Istanto (2011) and Lee and Chan (2007) stated, podcasts could be used as supporting materials along with course materials to develop students' proficiency in English. Students could listen to the same episode a few times and still learn something new each time, and they could fit the podcast lessons into their daily routine, by listening to them during the drive to school or as a bedtime story (Fehennig, 2017, p. 31). Istanto (2011) designed five podcast units as supplementary materials to develop learners' listening skills and grammar knowledge for 20 undergraduates who learned Indonesian as a foreign language. The results indicated that the application of podcasts enhanced students' listening skills and grammar knowledge as well as knowledge of the culture of the target community. Meanwhile, Li (2010) stated that students enjoyed listening to podcasts and showed willingness to embrace this new technology in honing their language skills. However, Chan et al. (2006) said that students might have problems with the length and style of podcasts so it would be best to limit them to 5 minutes, which was roughly the length of a typical song.

In summation, the present study found that the learning achievement of the STOU undergraduates who used the podcast English lessons increased from 11.67 to 20.03, which meant that the lessons were efficient.

Students' behaviour in learning English through podcasts

Table 3 shows the demographic background of the 30 STOU undergraduates.

Table 3

Demographic Background of 30 STOU Undergraduates

Demographic background	Number	(n = 30)
		Percentage (%)
1. Age		
Less than 20 years	1	3.33
Between 20 – 30	15	50
Between 30 - 40	9	30
More than 40 years old	5	16.66
	30	100
2. Gender		
Male	9	30
Female	21	70
	30	100.0
3. Occupation		
Student	9	30
Government officer	8	26.6
Private company employee	8	26.6
Private Business	1	3.33
Freelance	1	3.33
Retired	1	3.33
N/A	2	6.66
	30	100.0

From Table 3, it can be seen that 50% of the 30 STOU undergraduates were 20 to 30 years old while 70% were female. Students made up 30% of them while government officers and private company employees made up 26.6% each.

Behaviour of the students learning English through podcasts

The questionnaire contained four questions which will be discussed as follows:

Time of day listening to the podcasts. The results showed that 60% (n=18) enjoyed listening to the podcasts before bedtime, 16.7% (n=5) enjoyed listening while commuting to and from work, 10% liked listening at dawn, and 6.65 % (n=2) loved listening while working and eating. These results are quite different from those of a survey which found that between the first and third quarters of 2019, 32% of all time spent listening to podcasts in the United States occurred between 10am and 3pm (Statista Research Department, 2021). Meanwhile, just 6% of podcast listening time took place during the night, compared to 18% from late afternoon to early evening. Researchers who would like to conduct further studies might need to do more surveys on this matter, with a higher number of participants and more diverse demographics.

Length of podcast listening time. With regard to the students' learning behaviour, 63.3% (n=19) of the students could listen to the podcasts for about 30 minutes while 20% (n=6) could listen for about 15 minutes, 13.3% (n=4) could listen for less than 15 minutes, and 3.4% (n=1) could listen for more than an hour.

The main reason the students liked learning through the podcasts is their way of life. They use a lot of technology in their daily lives, such as smartphones, tablets, and computers. According to Chung and Kim (2016), college students use podcasts more

for voyeurism, social interaction, and companionship, as well as for entertainment, relaxation, and arousal. They report higher levels of gratification when they use podcasts for entertainment, relaxation, arousal, education, information, and convenience. Their affinity towards podcast use is associated with an increase in the actual hours of technology use and gratification as well.

Frequency of listening to a podcast episode. The result showed that 55.2 % (n=16) could listen more than twice per one episode of English lesson, 34.5 % (n=10) could listen twice per one episode and 10.3% (n=4) could listen only once per one episode. Usually for listening skills, teachers would ask their students to listen to English dialogues many times so that the most common patterns would be created in the students' minds and they would become familiar with the pronunciation. These podcasts comprised both content and dialogue, so some students need to listen only once or twice while others might need a lot of repetition.

Favourite episode. The undergraduates' most favourite podcast was on the *Titanic*. In the Line application, some of the students said that they liked a movie so much after listening to a podcast that they searched for it in order to watch it in its entirety and learn from it again. This information might help other researchers who would like to study the use of podcasts for teaching and learning purposes in the future.

Conclusion

Podcasts are not only a source of entertainment but also a good option for teaching and learning. Students can use them to supplement their textbooks and listen to them at their convenience with a little effort as they are very easy to access. Language learners can choose from a vast variety of topics and listen to them on their smartphone or other mobile devices anytime anywhere at no cost. However, language teachers need to work a bit harder to create podcasts with interesting content for their students. They must learn about and consider their students' interests, motivations, and demographic background. The length and style of the podcasts should be appropriate so as to achieve production efficiency and attract students' interest. The findings of this study show not only that podcasts can help students to develop their language skills but also encourage all educational administrators, teachers, and lecturers to pay more attention to supplementary materials apart from textbooks and create valuable new tools and platforms which match students' lifestyle and suit their learning styles.

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