Quality Indicators for English Language Learning Podcasts

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Abstract

Podcasts, along with mobile assisted language learning (MALL), have been promoted as promising tools in second language learning, whereas quality indicators of such existing podcast programs in *iTunes* have not been generalized. Applying previous empirical results on predictors of listening comprehension, the purpose of this research was to identify some good English language learning podcast programs in *iTunes* and build up a list of the quality indicators that have been considered during the podcast selection process. Participants were 26 English as second language (ESL) learners at a southwestern American university and two of their Listening and Speaking teachers. After selecting the six initial podcast programs in iTunes, participants evaluated each of them through questionnaires. The results revealed that the podcast program that both students and teachers preferred were *VOA Learning English*, and they both preferred podcasts that had interesting topics, natural speed, and clear pronunciation. Nevertheless, great discrepancies between learners' and teachers' responses and between the two teachers' responses have been identified. Based on these results, the pedagogical implications are presented at the end.

Keywords: English, L2 listening, MALL, podcasts

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Background

Podcast is a portmanteau which combines the "pod" from iPod, an MP3 player produced by Apple Inc., with "broadcast." Nowadays, people can publish their own audio or even video podcasts on the internet via different social networking websites, such as *iTunes*, *MySpace*, *Facebook*, and *YouTube* (Cooper, Dale, & Spencer, 2009). After uploading the podcasts, people all over the world could download them on their mobile or PC devices and listen repeatedly (McMinn, 2008). In the field of language education, technological devices that are portable or mobile are also known as m-learning or mobile assisted language learning (MALL). MALL has the advantages of extending students' learning from inside the classroom to outside the classroom and allowing students to study whenever and whatever they want.

In *iTunes*, there are a large number of language learning podcasts that are now available. Different language teachers and researchers recommended learners to subscribe to these existing podcasts to improve their language skills (e.g., O'Bryan & Hegelheimer, 2007; Sze, 2007). However, one obstacle that the language teachers and researchers often face is the selection of the most appropriate and suitable podcasts. Applying previous empirical results on predictors of listening comprehension in listening passages (e.g., Freedle & Kostin, 1999; Stæhr, 2009), the purpose of this research was to identify some effective English language learning podcast programs in *iTunes* and build up a list of the quality indicators that have been considered during the podcast selection process.

Research Questions

This study was conducted to explore the following two research questions: (a) From learners' perspectives, what are their favorite podcasts in *iTunes*, and what factors influence their

preferences? (b) From teachers' perspectives, what are their favorite podcasts in *iTunes*, and what factors influence their preferences?

Methods

Students who attended this study were 26 PIE Level 4 students enrolled in the Spring 2014 semester. This study was conducted during their CALL classes. The two Level 4 Listening and Speaking teachers also participated in this study. Prior to learners' evaluations on different podcasts, the author selected six podcasts from the *iTunes Store*. The podcast quality indicators that have been considered in this process were the length of each episode, the number of the episodes, users' rating scores, the number of the ratings, accents, and sound quality. Then, these six selected podcasts were evaluated by the students and the two teachers through questionnaires.

The process of selecting the six initial podcast programs was presented in Figure 1.
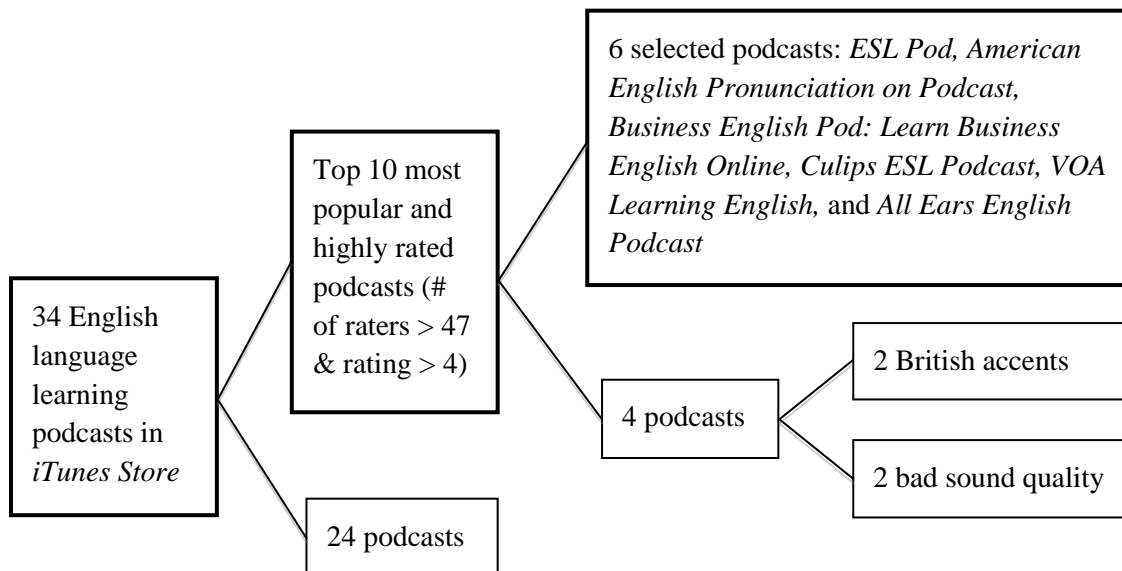
Figure 1. The process of selecting six initial podcasts.

Results

Students' and teachers' responses to the questionnaires will be discussed in the following sections.

The top-three podcasts rated by the students were *VOA Learning English*, *All Ears English Podcast*, and *American English Pronunciation on Podcast*. Additionally, the students' selections of their preference criteria that more than half of the students ($n > 13$) selected were (a) *a. the vocabulary words in the podcast are easy to understand* ($n = 22$), (b) *i. the speakers pronounce words clearly* ($n = 19$), (c) *c. the topics are interesting* ($n = 19$), (d) *h. the speed is natural* ($n = 18$), and (e) *b. the grammar structures are simple* ($n = 14$).

With regards to teachers' responses, *Culips ESL podcast* and *VOA Learning English* were the two podcasts that both teachers favored. The specific advantages of these two podcasts mentioned by the two teachers were "natural sounding" (Teacher A) and "appropriate speed and topic" (Teacher B) for *Culips ESL podcast* and "authentic news" (Teacher B) for *VOA Learning English*. Also, both of them disfavored *American English Pronunciation on Podcast* and *Business English Pod: Learn Business English Online*. For the *American English Pronunciation on Podcast*, Teacher A stated that "face-to-face instruction is better than using podcasts to teach pronunciation," and for the *Business English Pod: Learn Business English Online*, both teachers thought the topic might be suitable for students majoring in business but not as suitable for their Level 4 students, many of whom will not major in business. Teachers' preferences of the *ESL Pod* and *All Ears English Podcast* showed larger discrepancies. Teacher A liked *All Ears English Podcast* because it "provided learners different learning strategies," whereas Teacher B disliked it because "it was too casual." For *ESL Pod*, Teacher B thought "the topics were suitable for the academic purpose," but Teacher A disliked it because "the speed was too slow."

In summation, the main podcast program that both students and teachers preferred were *VOA Learning English*, and both groups preferred podcasts that had interesting topics, natural speed, and clear pronunciation.

Relevance to PIE and Second Language Learning

Pedagogically, the factors that teachers or learners need to consider for selecting a good quality podcast are the length of each episode, the number of the episodes, users' rating scores, the number of the ratings, accents, sound quality, topics, and the speed. Meanwhile, it is also worth noting that there were great discrepancies between learners' and teachers' responses and between the two teachers' responses. In attempting to choose the most appropriate podcast, teachers should take students' preferences into consideration. On the other hand, students should also value teachers' professional suggestions.

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