

The power of podcasting: creating opportunities for medical students to speak with creativity and confidence

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Abstract

The world is becoming increasingly globalized, and the medical field is no different. This trend has substantial implications for medical professionals in Japan who communicate and collaborate with their counterparts from other countries. Not to mention the recent trend of increased foreign immigration and tourism, which requires Japanese doctors to communicate with patients in English. English education is compulsory from the 5th grade of elementary school through the 3rd year of high school. However, the classes primarily focus on textbook learning and less on a communicative approach; students thus graduate high school but lack the ability and confidence to speak English. The Clinical English Department at Nara Medical University has created a curriculum that focuses more on creating opportunities for medical students to build up their English speaking skills and to provide multiple ways for the students to regularly communicate in English inside and outside the traditional classroom-setting to foster self-efficacy. One example is the Podcasts and Podcasting course that records and publishes student-created podcast episodes focusing on student storytelling, crafted monologues, and impromptu conversations on topics related to their studies, extracurriculars, and Japanese culture. The unique course was imagined and birthed during the

start of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and has continued since. This paper discusses the set-up and purpose of the podcast class, shares one student's views on this unique course, and describes some of the unexpected benefits and incredible potential of podcasting.

Keywords: podcast, podcasting, speaking competence, storytelling, motivation

Introduction

In today's medical field, doctors and other medical staff are increasingly expected to be able to communicate with patients in English. Furthermore, many of the most important medical research papers are written in English, and understanding and using these papers is an essential skill for healthcare professionals worldwide (Mayers et al., 2023). Not to mention that English has become the lingua franca of medicine. Baethge (2008) explains, "International communication among clinicians and scientists is now almost exclusively in English" (p.37). In the past, it may have been believed by many that this trend did not affect Japanese doctors who lived and worked in a predominantly Japanese country. However, Japan has become increasingly internationalized in the last decade, with the population of foreign residents in Japan hitting a record level of 3.2 million (Number, 2023). Inbound tourism to Japan has also returned to all-time monthly highs following a temporary dip during the pandemic (Monthly, 2023). There is just no way around it. Japanese medical professionals need an understanding of English and, more importantly, the skill of communicating in English at a high level. It can also be said for the medical students studying to be professional doctors and researchers at Nara

Medical University.

Much like other skill-based activities such as sports and music, becoming proficient in English requires not only a large quantity of time but, more importantly, regular practice (Haith et al., 2018). The majority of students who have entered Nara Medical University have spent the past several years of their education (elementary, junior high, and high school) taking English classes where they focused on learning the fundamentals of English grammar and memorizing vocabulary (Ikegashira, 2009). These are the building blocks of the language, and undoubtedly, obtaining this knowledge has assisted them in passing a complex English university entrance examination. On the contrary, all that knowledge alone does not translate to communication ability in English, as can be witnessed when they are directed to speak in pairs for 10 minutes in the first classes at the start of the semester. The apprehension is palpable as the students attempt to talk with their partners while the teacher observes them.

In recent years, the Department of Clinical English (DoCE) at Nara Medical University has primarily taught twice-weekly compulsory English courses for first-year medical students. Understanding the importance of habitual practice in the classroom, the curriculum for these classes has been designed to allow for ample amounts of productive tasks that use all four skills (speaking, listening, writing, and listening), but with particular attention to regular communicative tasks that require the students to speak in pairs or small groups. Each class has multiple opportunities to speak freely about student-chosen topics or discuss teacher-directed academic topics. The initial uneasiness that came with being asked to speak English with, and in front of, their peers due to a lack of previous experience gives way to active and

frequently fruitful conversations or discussions as the speaking practice activities become second nature for our students. By the end of the academic year, the students who merely participate regularly in these twice-weekly compulsory classes see real progress in their speaking abilities.

However, some obvious limitations present themselves in the traditional classroom setting when it comes to practicing English conversations and discussions that must be addressed. One is that speaking practice activities are highly structured, and the classroom environment lacks authenticity. In other words, practice is just practice, and feels like practice. The students are keenly aware of this controlled and safe environment. Once they get past the initial jitters of speaking in English with their classmates, they relax into a setting that does not require them to take risks, and frequently, the conversations become somewhat formulaic and stale. Although they make progress within this controlled environment, they often are not ready to reliably use their newfound English speaking skills in real-world situations with other native and non-native English speakers, which will be unavoidable in their future medical profession. As one of their instructors who sincerely wants to see the students succeed in real-life English-speaking situations, I have occasionally felt stymied by the limitations of teaching English to medical students in the classroom. Surprisingly, I found one intriguing solution to this dilemma when the world was flipped upside down with the COVID-19 pandemic.

As the spring semester of 2020 was set to begin, the university notified us that all compulsory classes would go online and all elective classes would be postponed indefinitely. Many of the teachers had limited to no experience with teaching online classes. In addition, the students also had virtually no

prior experience with taking online classes. The incoming first-year students would also not have the opportunity to meet their classmates in person before or even during that first semester. These new circumstances presented tremendous challenges to carrying out a curriculum designed to offer multiple chances to practice speaking. In other words, speaking practice within the classroom setting has inherent limitations, as I previously stated. Furthermore, the situation brought on by the pandemic made it much more challenging to provide the necessary practice required for students to excel in English communication.

Although it felt dire, the situation allowed me to reflect more deeply on what I felt students needed to communicate well and prepare themselves for real-life situations. Considering regular classes were put on hold, I wanted to do something to make up for what these new students would be missing out on in their first year. Those difficult circumstances eventually inspired me to brainstorm unconventional ways of teaching, and a light-bulb moment occurred. Holiday states, “The obstacle in the path becomes the path. Never forget, within every obstacle is an opportunity to improve our condition” (2014, p. 7). The challenge brought on by the pandemic ended up being the key to the solution.

The birth of the podcast

Several years ago, I purchased my first smartphone. As I was attempting to familiarize myself with the device, I noticed that there were already many pre-installed apps, including one titled “Podcasts.” I did not know what that

word meant at the time, but rather quickly, it became one of the apps I used most regularly. The word podcast combines “pod” from the Apple product iPod and “cast” from broadcast. It is an audio file uploaded to the internet and then downloaded freely to audio-playing devices such as smartphones or computers (Jordan, 2007). In most cases, it tends to be a show with regular episodes devoted to themed content. The millions of podcasts broadcasted today cover an infinite number of topics.

I started out listening to podcasts as a form of entertainment. Still, I quickly realized that podcasts might serve some purpose for language study and searched for some that focused on studying Japanese. These podcasts provided hours and hours of free Japanese instruction that I could listen to on my daily train commute to work. After several months of listening to these podcasts, I realized I could combine my interests with Japanese study and sought out comedy and sports podcasts in Japanese. It turned out that podcasts explicitly created for Japanese listeners could also provide excellent listening practice for Japanese language learners. I realized I could also suggest that the medical students start listening to podcasts as a supplemental form of English study. Furthermore, it sparked the idea that rather than just having students listen to podcasts, what if we produced our own?

The pandemic took away most of the opportunities for our students to practice English. Still, it also introduced us to the video-conferencing platform ZOOM, allowing us to meet online and record our conversations. I began to realize that a podcast-making class had the potential for increased speaking practice in an authentic environment with the possibility of real-life listeners from around the world. However, I did not initially grasp that making a podcast could provide so much more for the students. The real potential of

the podcast class was revealed only after recording several podcasts with various students. The results have been encouraging.

Student perspective

The Department of Clinical English at Nara Medical University offers a variety of English classes and activities, and “Podcasts and Podcasting” is one of the higher-level classes that some students can join voluntarily in addition to regular lectures. Several fifth-year medical students, a couple of third-year medical students, and a fourth-year nursing student join this class weekly. We record our conversations and monologues during the class, which our teacher subsequently edits into a podcast program. Although this may sound similar to daily conversations, podcasting has more exciting and challenging aspects. It also contributes to the improvement of various abilities other than English, and students can learn numerous things through it. I will highlight the power of podcasting in the context of education.

Unlike many other medical universities, Nara Medical University (NMU) has an independent department for English education called The Department of Clinical English (DoCE). This department has a lot of non-Japanese teachers with diverse backgrounds and offers many chances for medical students to use English in various ways, especially speaking. DoCE is running regular classes for first-year medical students, and during class, students are required to have discussions mainly on scientific topics. This class is regarded as one of the most difficult at NMU and one of the highest levels of English lectures at medical schools in Japan. Moreover, DoCE has extra non-credit elective classes

called "Advanced Classes," including the Podcasts and Podcasting class. These electives give motivated students more chances to use English and help them better understand it. Meanwhile, there are some additional situations where students can utilize English outside the classroom. NMU has an English club called "English Speaking Society (ESS)," and students in this club voluntarily learn, speak, and use English in many ways. Another example of an unofficial system is the NMU Organization For International Students (NOFIS) organization, which creates opportunities to interact with international students. More and more international students are coming to Nara Medical University Hospital for internships, and that number has reached more than 20 annually. NOFIS functions as a bridge between Japanese students/doctors and international students, and is helping both sides build up a mutual understanding of both cultures.

Why is English so important for doctors or medical students? Why does NMU emphasize English education? Most students and teachers now recognize that English is one of the keys to successful careers, as it gives us far more opportunities to exchange precious opinions with global scientists and doctors. With high-level English capabilities, we can easily cross borders and work or research overseas. Western countries, including the United States and the United Kingdom, often arrange better research situations than Japan. Besides, since Japan is rapidly aging and its market is expected to shrink, some people, including me, believe that English ability may save our working future by increasing the possibility of obtaining better jobs outside Japan. At the same time, however, we must acknowledge that some students and doctors have little confidence in their English abilities and that the perception of English and its value seems to vary from individual to individual.

Next, let me explain what the Podcasts and Podcasting class is. It is one of the Advanced Classes at NMU where a teacher and students record their conversations and later upload them to the web. Jordan (2007) states that "Podcast" is a combination of "pod" and "broadcast"; it is an audio-delivering service that broadcasts lots of programs in various fields such as music, news, comedy, and so on. In short, it is a contemporary radio program format where we can acquire information from sources worldwide. We can also share information and our own stories worldwide through it. In short, "podcasting" means recording and sharing information. During the class, we simply record our daily communications. Usually, we do not prepare drafts but speak spontaneously, except on special occasions requiring advanced vocabulary or intricate background knowledge. Therefore, what is the relationship between regular courses and the Podcasts and Podcasting class? Due to the high-level English lectures during our first year of medical college, the average English level of first-year students is quite advanced. As such, NMU successfully maintains and even raises the English ability of its students after admission. In contrast, in most universities, students' English levels significantly fall shortly after entering college as they stop using English following their entrance examinations. Nevertheless, there is no denying that these regular classes have some limitations; classes are primarily an extrinsic motivation to use English, and usually, teachers assign topics. Also, we have a limited length of time in class. The Podcasts and Podcasting class can compensate for these limitations and offer more authentic chances to communicate in English. With that, podcasting has excellent potential to improve students' speaking skills (Iskandar, 2017).

Next, let me describe what makes podcasting different from daily conversation. Since podcasting means recording conversations, most people

may believe it must be identical to daily communication. However, podcasting incorporates additional factors beyond speaking English, giving us extra challenges: nervousness, intensity, and imagination, leading to carefulness and mindfulness. First of all, we feel more pressure and tension when recording a podcast since we potentially want to avoid making mistakes that may be heard by thousands of people worldwide. However, nervousness ironically causes mistakes and errors, one of the most challenging parts of podcasting, yet this authenticates our English ability. In the future, as a doctor, medical students have to speak English under some pressure, and it is always important to get back on track quickly when making a mistake; for example, when making a presentation in front of dozens of people or when giving a short, accurate summary of patients to our seniors. Therefore, podcasting improves our English skills, which will be useful in the future. I have good reason to believe that podcasting cultivates authentic English ability. Secondly, we must employ our imagination and add explanations so listeners can understand and enjoy our episodes. Since podcasts do not possess the visual information we usually rely heavily on when communicating, conveying information in podcasts is more complex than other visual social media such as YouTube or Instagram. Moreover, of course, people all around the world can listen to our stories, and actually, the variety of listeners' backgrounds is far more diverse than we expected. Hence, we always need to pay attention to how we explain things and often add some explanations for listeners across the ocean with different cultures, ideas, and backgrounds to easily understand and feel as if they were right there with us. Thirdly, these two factors, nervousness and imagination, lead to carefulness and mindfulness. It is essential to be as careful and considerate as possible so the listener will not feel uncomfortable or possibly offended. Since Japan is an island nation with less diversity than continental nations, such as many countries in Europe or the U.S., we sometimes assume a

shared understanding and tend to be careless and thoughtless. Such being the case, we have to pay more attention to our remarks than usual when speaking to people from different backgrounds. In conclusion, through podcasting, we can learn numerous things that we would not otherwise be able to learn through daily conversation. Fitria et al. (2015) point out that podcasting can improve students' speaking. Authentic practice and student storytelling are essential.

Despite the various difficulties mentioned above, why are students attracted to podcasting? The answer is simple. It is attractive for several reasons. One is our desire to be listened to; another is exposure to the world. Podcasting fulfills our potential desire to be listened to and understood. Hughes et al. (2022) explain, "Storytelling is a way that people can relate to each other, and stories have long been used as a way to get people thinking about viewpoints beyond their own as well as to express our experiences to others." Unfortunately, in Japan, we have few chances to express ourselves and discuss various issues in class, although English classes at our university are one of the few exceptions. Perhaps the right way to put it is that we are reluctant to voice our opinions in public, especially in front of large groups of people. However, everyone potentially wants to be listened to and recognized. Podcasting provides a valuable opportunity to express and share our thoughts and feelings comfortably. As we usually record with only a couple of friends, it feels safe for students. For instance, I have a friend who is so shy that she hardly ever raises her hand and speaks out in class, even though she is smart and has a strong sense of self-worth. However, she tells us her ideas and thoughts in the podcast class, which I could not have known in other classes. In that sense, I can say that podcasts have a magical power to invigorate Japanese students. Furthermore, another aspect of podcasting that draws

students' attention is that they do not have to expose their faces, only their voices. Most students are not comfortable showing their faces to unfamiliar people. However, once the privacy issue has been removed, it is surprising how naturally students begin to talk about their opinions and circumstances. In conclusion, from a student's perspective, podcasting is a lot of fun, but it is not just fun; it is an excellent way to practice and acquire authentic English skills.

Finally, a significant benefit students can enjoy through podcasting without being aware of it is gaining recognition as an English speaker. Over the past few decades, the number of non-native speakers has skyrocketed, reaching almost four times as large as that of native speakers. However, only some students perceive themselves as English speakers, and many do not. The lack of identity as an English speaker is a hidden and unconscious burden that prevents many Japanese students from making real progress using English as a communication tool (Goharimehr, 2018). Finally, podcasting can gradually cultivate awareness of being an English speaker through authentic and natural communication.

By the Numbers

The Podcasts and Podcasting class commenced in the autumn of 2020. Hoping to recruit students to try this experimental class, I advertised through our campus email network. Initially, two students signed up for the introduction class. Only one student eventually decided to join. It was a blessing in disguise as it allowed the two of us (teacher and student) to work

together through trial and error to formulate the class and, more importantly, launch the podcast itself. Within a couple of weeks, we decided on our show's name and concept. The name of the podcast is *Medical Student Life in Japan*. We cover topics centered on being a student at a medical college in Japan and topics highlighting Japanese culture (Blodgett, 2020-present). Over time, we have developed our podcasting skills and upgraded our equipment to create a better product for our listening audience. This includes investing in a high-quality microphone and using audio editing software like Apple's Garageband. By the end of that first semester, we already had several published episodes under our belts and a small but growing audience of listeners worldwide.

To date, the Podcasts and Podcasting class has continued for four years. In those four years, we have had over 30 students join the class as regularly attending students or as visiting speakers and interviewees. It includes students spanning all six years of our medical college. Although many of the students possess an advanced level of English communication skills, there have also been several beginners join the class and thrive. We have even invited guests on the show including Nara Medical University graduates, medical students from Taiwan, and a medical student studying in Cuba. We have created 85 episodes covering various topics, including classes, extracurriculars, the school festival, medical treatments, Japanese food, and many more. These 85 episodes equate to over 1500 minutes of content, equalling more than one whole day. Most interestingly, for the students, we have had listeners from 68 countries worldwide.

Conclusion

Storytelling is the glue that connects the students' experience with my original intention of facilitating a type of speaking practice that would translate to an ability to operate in real-world situations. These future doctors may now be able to communicate with their counterparts worldwide and do so confidently. The realization that the students were seeking to express themselves, in essence, a desire to share their own stories, now makes a lot of sense. Sometimes, in the structured classroom, that is what is missing. Students are instructed to practice, but as previously stated, it feels like nothing more than that, and their investment in the activity is minimal. In contrast, by creating a podcast, these students learned how to develop their speaking ability and how to communicate their stories effectively, and with that, their confidence has grown. The high level of energy and emotion they feel while recording their stories is striking. It is the same reason I felt listening to podcasts was so worthwhile when I first became acquainted with them several years ago. Humans are inclined to enjoy stories, both listening to them and sharing their own.

This paper takes a preliminary look at the benefits of podcasting with students to provide additional speaking practice that is authentic. Although it is a small sample size, the results are exceedingly positive. Undoubtedly, it may be more than challenging to apply the concepts laid out here to a large number of students, which is often the case in the typical university class. Nonetheless, this class type has excellent potential as a supplemental class or activity for students eager to polish their speaking skills and unleash the power of sharing their stories in English.

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