

Perceptions of University Students and Lecturers in the Use of Podcasting in Language Learning and Teaching

Kretsai Woottipong^{1*}

¹ Lecturer, Department of Western Languages , Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences,
Thaksin University

* Corresponding author, E-mail: kretsai@yahoo.com

Abstract

The purpose of this study was two-fold: to determine how university students at Thaksin University used video podcast lesson summaries and to examine university students and lecturers' attitudes towards learning English expository writing via video podcast lesson summaries. A sample group of 73 university students at Thaksin University participated in a sixteen-week period in this study. The participants also included two language lecturers. Simple random sampling was used to select the sample group. The study involved a mixed-method approach using both qualitative and quantitative data derived from student surveys, student podcast journals, a student focus group, and a lecturer interview. The results were reported as percentages and frequencies. The results showed that it is easy to use, improve writing skills and enjoyable at the same time, and show effectiveness of using technology in the classroom. Based on the interview result, students and lecturers expressed more positive than negative opinions as they thought that video podcast lesson summaries are easy and useful for them to learn the material in the course outside and inside the classroom.

Keywords: Video Podcast, Language Learning and Teaching

1. Introduction

The influence of podcasts on education has been overwhelming. In this regard, the effect of this learning tool has been shown through providing flexibility and helping learner to control their learning at their own pace and their own time while watching or listening, creating freedom of learning. Besides, they strengthen comprehension of subject matter and help students to review matter already learnt. Beheler (2007) further explained that instructors might use podcast as an effective teaching instrument by implementing podcast lectures to classroom websites and inviting their students to access the websites to strengthen their learning. Students can enhance their learning through listening to the

podcasts online or downloading the podcasts for later use outside the classroom. Podcast lectures could be used to help learners to review course materials at their convenience, which may be helpful for EFL learners.

Since podcasting is an innovative mobile technology, only small numbers of research existed prior to this study regarding best practices for its effective use within foreign language teaching context. Initial investigation indicated that no previous research, as far as the researcher knows, has a focus on the effects of podcast instruction in ESL writing courses in Thai context, showing a research issue and knowledge gap in the field of EFL teaching. Therefore, this study intended to integrate podcasting into an EFL writing class to investigate the impact of using podcast instruction on learners' writing ability. The research focusing on the effects of podcast instruction in EFL learning, might provide useful information for instructors who plan to use podcasts as teaching tools, which might enhance students learning in ESL and EFL courses.

To address this speculation, the video podcast lesson summaries were constructed to present English writing related to academic writing and in terms that students could easily understand. The English writing video podcast lesson summaries were used to support the current academic writing lessons in order to prepare students for review lessons or exams. The video podcast lesson summaries were constructed for use as an out-of-class supplemental tool.

2. Objectives

The purposes of this study are to determine how university students at Thaksin University used video podcast lesson summaries and to examine their attitudes towards learning English academic writing via video podcast lesson summaries.

3. Methods

3.1 Participants

73 English major students, 47 females and 26 males, in this study were enrolled in an Academic Writing class. The two lecturers participated in this study: one is an experienced instructor for fourteen years on an academic writing subject. Another lecturer has three-year experiences in teaching academic writing course too

3.2 Materials

A mixed methods approach was used in this study. Data were collected from both students and lecturers. A journal, survey and a student focus group were employed to collect data from the students. For the two lecturers, data were collected via the interview in order to support data of the participants' use of podcast.

3.3 Types of video podcast lesson summaries

The podcast treatments were viewed as supplementary classroom materials. All students were given access to the treatments and the podcast lesson summaries could be accessed in the university or at home. The podcast treatments provided supporting information that pertained to the four writing units: Process Essays, Division and Classification Essays, Problem/Solution Essays and Opinion Essays. Each of the lessons of the podcast lesson summaries was from 10 - 15 minutes long.

3.4 Procedures

Before any student data were collected, the two participating lecturers explain the purpose, procedures, and possible risks of the study. The students were advised that this study involved accessing podcast lesson summaries associated with academic writing and that participating would possibly help them better understand the subject material and ultimately increase their overall grade in the subject. Participating students were given the podcast journal forms and asked to keep a biweekly journal of their podcast activities as they accessed podcasts. Eight journals were provided to each student and they were collected by the two lecturers. The two classroom lecturers had orally explained, at the start of the study, that a new grammatical and vocabulary podcast related to each week's grammatical and vocabulary quiz would be posted at the start of each week. After the podcasts had been posted, they remained on the university website for the students to access throughout the semester. At the end of the study, the student survey was administered by the two classroom lecturers and the completed surveys given to the researcher. A week after the study, the student focus group and the lecturer interview were conducted. Once these discussions and interview were completed, the data collection process for this study was concluded.

3.5 Data analysis

All data associated with this study were linked back to the research questions and the overall problem theme. Because the data associated with the Likert-scale survey were ordinal in nature, the data were reported in the form of descriptive statistics—frequency and percentages. Data gathered from the student focus group and the lecturer interview

were analyzed using categories of word or phrases and reported in the form of frequency tables. Open-ended questions were analyzed using word phrase categories and word frequency categories. These data were reported in the form of a frequency table with the words or phrases used and their percentages of use. The words-word phrases that the students provided on the data collection tools were organized into three categories. Each student's word(s) or phrase was placed into categories of positive, negative, and not sure, responses that reflected students' beliefs regarding components of a particular podcast lesson summaries. Student views, recorded in the journals, were placed into the categories of negative, positive, or not sure to represent their overall experience with podcasting.

4. Results and discussion

4.1 The first research objective

Student data rendered information similar to that garnered in studies conducted in higher education settings. The students who participated in the study and completed the required data collection tools provided some interesting information that mirrored early collegiate studies podcast lesson summaries use in the classroom. One of the areas of concern broached by participants in this study was their inability, primarily at home, to access the podcast lesson summaries in a consistent manner. Most of the students were able to connect without any problems through podcast application on their cell phones.

Most of the students in this study, 72.6% of them, preferred to listen to the podcast lesson summaries on their cell phone. These data were supported with findings from the student journal entries and the student focus group.

Of the students who participated in the study, 48% indicated they wanted podcast lesson summaries that were 10 - 15 minutes in length. Furthermore, 34.3% of the students indicated they also liked podcast lesson summaries that were over 25 minutes in length, which would be long enough to cover most reviews. The solution could also be simple: break the larger podcast lesson summaries into smaller segments that would fit the 10 - 15 minute range. The 10 - 15 minute range for the podcast lesson summaries might also promote the use of portable devices because the segments would be smaller and the students might feel they did not need to be tethered to a cell phone, either at home or at university. In so doing, the files would be smaller and the students might be willing to delete some of their songs to make room for the podcast lesson summaries on their portable devices.

However, more students did not take advantage of the true mobile learning opportunity that podcast lesson summaries represent. Some students explained that they appreciated the mobility of the podcast lesson summaries. One student even related how he used the podcast lesson summaries on a family trip, listening to them on his iPod while in the car.

The lecturer interview data indicated one of them was also disappointed that the students did not take better advantage of the portability aspect of podcasting. Furthermore, he related that the podcast lesson summaries were working well with special needs students and that, in general, the students enjoyed the novelty associated with podcasting. Both of the participating lecturers believed the podcast lesson summaries were valuable in covering the most difficult material in the course.

The findings related to the first objective were similar to those of some of the higher education studies. Brittain et al. (2006) and Fietze (2009), as did this study, that student primarily listened to podcast lesson summaries at home and on their cell phones. Data from the present study also indicated student appreciation for being able to listen anytime and anywhere, as was reported by Donnelly and Berge (2006), Tynan and Colbran (2006), and Bongey et al. (2006). Furthermore, data from the present study indicated students liked the ability to fast-forward, stop, and rewind the podcast lesson summaries at will, as was also indicated in studies by Tynan and Colbran (2006).

Students in the present study indicated they had difficulty accessing the podcast lesson summaries in a timely and efficient manner. Students used podcast lesson summaries to review for exams, as illustrated in this study and in the study by Tynan and Colbran (2006). The students involved in the present study used podcast lesson summaries to understand classroom material better and to cover missed work, as students did in the studies by Bergman and Sams (2012).

4.2 The second research objective

Data indicated students perceived podcast lesson summaries as a positive learning tool, podcast lesson summaries were helpful in learning the material learned in the class, and podcast lesson summaries had an impact upon students' grades. Of the students in the study, 64.4% found the podcast lesson summaries helped them better understand the material that I missed while absent. Of the various podcast lesson summaries offered, 63% of the students found the most beneficial podcast lesson summaries are covering the Academic Writing exam reviews and podcast lesson summaries also increased students understanding of Academic Writing. In terms of whether the podcast lesson summaries had

an overall influence on their grades, 60.3% of the students found that the podcast lesson summaries helped them achieve their targets. These statistics are similar to those reported in studies conducted in higher education settings. As mentioned by the lecturers participating in this study, the more disciplined and hard-working students seemed to be a main group of podcast lesson summaries users. This development was shown in the data related to the student journals and with the student focus group.

By the end of the study, the five participants in the student focus group indicated they saw podcast lesson summaries as a positive way to learn classroom material, and three of the five students thought using the podcast lesson summaries had improved their grades. Students in the higher education studies indicated some of the same points. Studies by Tynan and Colbran (2006) and Lee et al. (2008) noted students reported podcast lesson summaries were a valuable tool that helped them understand information associated with a particular course. Studies also indicated, at the higher education level, a perception that podcast lesson summaries had helped students secure a higher grade in the class in which they were used (Bongey et al., 2006; Sanders, McNierney & Hazy, 2008; Tynan & Colbran, 2006; Vess, 2006).

Data collected for the second objective concerned student perception of the value of podcasting as an educational tool and were not based on academic performance data. However, some studies such as McKinney et al. (2009) did provide exam results that indicated podcast lesson summaries had an overall effect upon student learning or grades. Despite similar sentiments expressed in several studies, the research is not definitive. Hodges, Stackpole-Hodges, & Cox (2008) and Baker, Harrison, Thornton, & Yates (2008) indicated podcast lesson summaries did not have an impact on the overall grades of students. There is a need for continued research in fourth-year Academic Writing class and in higher education on the actual impact of podcast lesson summaries on overall student learning or grades in a course.

In addition, data collected showed that podcast lesson summaries did motivate students to study. Student users of podcast lesson summaries in this study indicated that podcast lesson summaries were a fun way to study, an easy way to understand the material that they missed while absent, listening to them motivated students to study. The student survey indicated that 63% believed the podcast lesson summaries were a fun way to prepare for an exam. A large majority (65.7%) of the responding students wanted to see podcast lesson summaries used in the other subjects. This last bit of information was a strong indicator of the direction in which students who participated in the study want

podcasting to go. These findings were further supported in the student journals. Students indicated in the student focus group that podcast lesson summaries did motivate them to study. The lecturer interview indicated the podcast lesson summaries motivated the students to study in a nontraditional manner. One of the participating lecturers reported her belief that the students who were already highly motivated were the ones who routinely used the podcast lesson summaries, as was illustrated in the student journals. These students perceived the podcast lesson summaries as another tool with which to attain a better understanding of the course's material and thus a better grade.

The findings in this study were similar to those found in studies presented in the review of literature. The key in all of the studies as to whether students bought into the motivational component of podcasting seemed to be student perception of podcast lesson summaries as being fun, not actual work, and "cool." Along with the motivational component came a sense of self-education and confidence as students were able to control the podcast lesson summaries and master the material they contained. Frantangeli (2009 as cited in Lauritzen, 2010) found podcast lesson summaries motivated the students in their studies. More specifically, within the motivational component of podcasting, Vess (2006) indicated students reported their belief that podcast lesson summaries made it easier to immerse themselves in the subject. Dale (2009) found podcast lesson summaries were fun for users.

5. Results of lecturer interview

5.1 The first research objective

The podcasting experience was positive. The lecturers reported that the students listened to the podcasts at home and at university using computers and their smartphone. The students also enjoyed using the podcasts and they could work at their own pace. Both lecturers indicated they would like to see, in the future, podcasts covering the rest of the expository writing units which are more difficult.

5.2 The second research objective

The lecturers in the study also provided information regarding potential problems and solutions related to podcasting. One of the potential troubles is that the students listened to the podcast lesson summaries and wrote down the answers to the review instead of looking up the answers first. When the students just copy the information from the podcast lesson summaries, it negates the skills portion of the review.

Both participating lecturers indicated the podcast lesson summaries had an impact on overall student learning. One of the lecturers mentioned that he saw an increase in test scores but did not explain as to how much of an increase. The impact of the podcast lesson summaries depended on the type of student involved. If the student was disciplined and motivated, then the podcast lesson summaries were an excellent tool to get a better grade. For the hard-working students, the podcast lesson summaries were a positive tool, while they were not fully employed for unenthusiastic students. Both of the participating lecturers revealed that the podcast lesson summaries motivated the students to study in a nontraditional manner. That is to say, the students were given the opportunity to be responsible for their own learning.

6. Recommendations for practice and future research

Some of the students in this study had problems accessing the podcasts in a timely and efficient manner. To solve this problem, it is recommended that additional technology training in how to access the podcasts from home and from school should be provided. The researcher also recommends that podcasts be used in the special education program. The podcasts might include all of the main content areas in the same manner so that the students can access the podcasts and learn the content at their own pace and time.

The findings of this study indicate that podcast lesson summaries can be useful in enhancing listening skills and learners generally have positive perception of this technology. The data associated with this study point toward potential areas regarding the usage of podcast lesson summaries usage in an Academic Writing environment. The foundation of knowledge for how university students use podcast lesson summaries, what types they like, and students' perceived value of podcasting has been established. Empirical studies should be conducted to determine whether podcasts have an actual impact upon student exam scores. They found the podcast lesson summaries group had higher exam scores than did the control group, but this study was the only one reviewed to have been conducted in this particular environment. More such studies in the Academic Writing environment are needed. Research might also be conducted on the impact podcast lesson summaries have on special education students. Specifically, research might consider whether the podcast lesson summaries help group of students understand the classroom material better and have better scores and grade. Another possible area of interest for future researchers is whether podcast lesson summaries might be used to replace afterschool tutorials.

7. References

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