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Contents | TESL-EJ Top

On the Internet

Podcasting: Audio on the Internet Comes of Age

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Podcasting, a catchy combination of the words *iPod* and *broadcasting*, is in vogue at the moment, and everyone who came late to the blogging party wants a piece of the action. If blogging is becoming the tool of choice for many writing instructors bent on giving a real world spin to their classes, then podcasting could be just the ticket for language teachers looking to extend the reach of their classrooms. This article aims to take a broad look at emerging trends in educational podcasting and suggest some ways it can be used to support language learning and teaching. I will concentrate on how it can be used with learners, suggest ways of introducing podcasts to a class, and show you how a podcast can be easily created in a matter of minutes using automatic podcasting sites, as well as mentioning other ways of creating podcasts. Although podcasting also includes video, this is beyond the scope of this article, which will concentrate on audio only.

1. What is podcasting and what is it not?

Technically speaking, and according to [Wikipedia](#), podcasting "is the distribution of audio or video files, such as radio programs or music videos, over the Internet, using either *RSS* or *Atom* syndication for listening on mobile devices and personal computers."

Listening to audio is nothing new to the Internet. Audio files available for downloading, streaming radio, audio blogging and other ways of listening on the Web have been around for some time. What puts podcasting apart from other ways of delivering audio online, such as *streaming*, is the idea of automatically downloaded content. What makes this possible is *RSS (Really Simple Syndication)*. Check out Will Richardson's *RSS Quick Start Guide for Educators* <http://www.weblogg-ed.com/rss_for_ed/> for further details of this technology. Just as *RSS* transformed blogging, enabling people to

manage vast quantities of text content, so a revision of RSS for podcasting has made it easier for people to now leave their homes with pieces of the Internet crammed into their mp3 players.

Of course, to really take advantage of podcasting, you need a high speed Internet connection. If you have access to this, you can plug in your mp3 player before you go to sleep at night, and in the morning it is full of fresh audio content. What allows you to do this is a piece of software usually called a "podcast receiver," such as *Juice*, the cross-platform application that is free to download from:

<http://juicereceiver.sourceforge.net/index.php>.

Once you have this, here are the stages you go through:

- Click on the subscriptions tab in *Juice* and then the '+' sign that enables you to 'add a feed'.
- Click on the RSS feed button of a podcast you want to subscribe to.
- A simple copy and paste of the address (URL) of the RSS feed will subscribe you to the podcast.
- You'll now see the podcast episode details load in the lower window of *Juice*.
- Whenever the podcast is updated, and so long as you are running *Juice*, this program will automatically download the new episodes to a directory you specify.

If this sounds easy, Apple's *iTunes* <<http://www.apple.com/itunes/>> makes it even easier by letting you subscribe to a podcast by dragging and dropping the RSS button into the *iTunes* podcast directory.

Listening to these new radio programs, audio books, recorded conversations, lectures, is becoming a more and more interesting way of usefully spending time when commuting or when you are traveling. In this way, people are discovering the new "audio Internet to go," which is making mobile learning more attractive possibility than it ever has been before.

2. How can listening to podcasts be used to support language learning?

a) Authentic listening extracts

At its most basic level, podcasts offer language teachers and students a wide range of possibilities for extra listening both inside and outside of the classroom. Supplementing the (often) scripted and stilted textbook listenings with the real life authentic conversations you can find on many podcasts is an attractive option for language teachers (not to mention their students). In my teaching context, I have used extracts from shows such as

- Notes from Spain <<http://www.notesfromspain.com>>

- Digital Flotsam <<http://digitalflotsam.org>>
- Morning Stories <http://www.wgbh.org/schedules/program-info?program_id=1434912>

(to mention just a few) to spice things up in class. Chosen carefully, extracts can provoke stimulating discussion, and also bring a range of different voices and varieties of English into the classroom, and podcasts can be selected because their theme ties into the curriculum. The best place to look for podcasts by theme is by using one of the many podcast directories. Two of the most popular ones are:

- Podcast Alley <<http://www.podcastalley.com>>
- Podcast Pickle <<http://www.podcastpickle.com>>

At more advanced levels, students can be encouraged to download and listen to entire episodes of podcasts that you choose for them for homework. If you add listening activities, which can be as simple as a note-taking or/and summary writing task (both of which require minimal teacher preparation), then this becomes more focused and rewarding for the students. An easy way of pointing to a variety of extra listening material on the Web is to set up a station for your class using Gigadial <<http://www.gigadial.net/public/>>. *Gigadial* is described as "a new approach to radio programming." You can use it to create a special channel for a particular group of learners and add any audio you want to it. This allows you (and the learners too if they come across interesting content they want to share) to link to audio files of individual podcast episodes that are interesting to the group. Introduce your learners to the concept of downloading audio via RSS (using iTunes, for example), and they will automatically receive extra listening that you choose as the course progresses.

If students don't have an Internet connection or mp3 player, then you could always download the podcasts for them, and create a class audio library on CD. This is also a way of gently introducing the idea of listening to podcasts to a group who are unfamiliar with the concept.

b) EFL/ESL podcasts

At lower levels, there are a range of specially produced podcasts aimed at language learners. The best place to start to look for these is at either Englishcaster <<http://www.englishcaster.com>> or the Internet TESL Journal's links <<http://iteslj.org/links/ESL/Listening/Podcasts/>>.

The range of EFL/ESL podcasts is growing, and many are supported by transcripts and exercises. Jeff McQuillan's ESL Podcast <<http://www.eslpod.com>> is not only the most popular of these, it is also one of the most popular podcasts of any genre, having a very large audience (more than 7,000 regular listeners). Another popular podcast for EFL is Robert Diem's English Idioms and Slang podcast

<<http://www.englishcaster.com/blogs/>>. The Bob and Rob Show <<http://englishcaster.com/bobrob/>> is also well produced and entertaining as well as being educational, and features "weekly English lessons from a Yankee and a Brit". A very different type of show, appropriate for low level learners can be found at Charles Kelly's Learn a Song podcast site <<http://www.manythings.org/songs/>>.

3. Creating podcasts with students

Apart from listening, it is also possible to use podcasts to extend the scope of the classroom by involving students in the creation and publishing of their own content for a real audience. You can also start a podcast exchange project with another class and students from other parts of the world. And don't be daunted by the prospect, as it now is very easy to do.

a) *Creating and publishing student podcasts the easy way*

The easiest way to create a podcast with students is to use one of the free automatic podcast creation sites such as Odeo <<http://www.odeo.com>> or Podomatic <<http://www.podomatic.com>>. Here are the stages you need to follow to be able to create a podcast at one of these sites:

- First, register for an account. You'll need to give a *username, password* and *email address*.
- Next, check the confirmation email and click on the link. This will take you to your new podcasting homepage.
- From here, you only need to click on one or two buttons ('*Record Audio*' at Odeo, and '*Post Episode*' at Podomatic) to record straight from your browser.
- Afterwards, your audio is automatically published as a podcast.

These sites really take the hard work out of podcasting, and mean you do not have to bother with finding server space, setting up a blog or establishing an RSS feed. Without a doubt, it is the quickest and best way to start, and means you can concentrate on the content of your podcast rather than technical aspects.

This way of producing a podcast is all very well if you have access to a computer lab where the students can record and post their own content. If your resources are limited and you want to record learners in a classroom, edit the audio and then publish it later, do not despair, as you can still use the previously mentioned sites. Here's how you do it:

- First, record your students in class. Use a digital voice recorder or a portable mp3 player that can record your students.
- Remove the unwanted sections and reorder the audio if necessary with audio editing software such as the free-to-download, easy to use Audacity <<http://audacity.sourceforge.net>>.

- Save the file as an mp3 file on your computer.
- Upload the mp3 file to Odeo or Podomatic.

There is a limit to the storage space on these free sites, and although you can upgrade to a paid account (or create more than one), there are other ways of publishing podcasts.

b) Creating and publishing student podcasts the difficult way

Although it is beyond the scope of this article to give details, briefly, here's what you'll need to do:

- Create the audio in **Audacity**, or using an mp3 recorder.
- Upload the file to server space (you can always use free space provided by a site such as Ourmedia <<http://www.ourmedia.org>>, where you will need to register with the Internet Archive beforehand <<http://www.archive.org>>.
- Set up a blog to act as home to your podcast. A good choice here is to use Edublogs <<http://www.edublogs.org>>.
- Set up an RSS feed that supports podcasting at Feedburner <<http://www.feedburner.com>> and add the button to your blog. Even if your blog already produces an RSS feed, it's worth setting up a separate feed with Feedburner just in case you ever want to change your blog in the future. You can also set up different feeds on the same blog, and so use it to have several podcasts.

If you would like to know more about this, you can always join the ELT Podcasting group, where you will find a helpful and friendly community of educators interested in podcasting: http://groups.yahoo.com/group/podcasting_elt/

4) Applications of student podcasts

Involving students in podcasting is still very much a developing area, but there is much to be said about involving learners in the act of publishing a podcast, especially if there is a real audience out there, which the learners can detect. If this is the case, you should see learners become far more interested in the quality of their work. In the educational sphere, the best example of how motivating this can be can be found by listening to any of the episodes of Bob Sprankle's Room 208 podcast <<http://www.bobsprankle.com/blog/>>. It is a clear example of how the new "digital natives" (Prensky, 2001) can be totally engaged in learning. The primary children of Bob Sprankle's class produce a weekly podcast, reaching out of the classroom to their parents and anyone else who takes an interest in what they have to say. The effect that producing content for a real audience beyond the classroom has had on student learning and motivation is an excellent model for how this type of publishing can be used to stimulate student education.

My own experience of producing a podcast with university students of tourism using <http://themetourism.blogspot.com> has also shown that publishing is a way of encouraging the learners to take greater care over the work that they do. The attention to detail and interest is superior to when learners are producing work which is only being seen by an audience of one (the teacher). Questionnaires given to the students after the course also showed they appreciated the value of the publishing project. One thing which is crucial is being able to demonstrate that the learners have an audience. For this project, promoting the address of the podcast via various podcast directories and educational podcasting groups made it relatively easy to find an audience for the learners' work. Another thing that helped was displaying graphically the number of visitors to the site by using the free tool from Clustrmap <<http://www.clustrmaps.com>> on the page, which clearly shows the number of visitors to the site as red spots on a map of the world.

Apart from audio reports, examples of EFL/ESL student-created podcasts include activities such as:

- speech work: <http://aidenyeh.podomatic.com>
- classroom discussions: <http://bardwellroad.podomatic.com>
- radio plays: <http://blog.klemm-site.de/wordpress/>

I'm sure there are many more applications out there just waiting to be discovered.

5. Beyond podcasting: live interactive student webcasting and video podcasting

What is the difference between a podcast and a webcast? Assuming the webcast meets the other podcast criteria (a recording is made and available via RSS on the Internet) there is one big difference: a webcast is transmitted live. When you involve students in live, interactive webcasts, communicating with other students from around the world, then you move into a very exciting area, especially if you want your students to be involved in an exchange program.

Although there is undoubtedly a lot of value involved in an asynchronous podcast exchange with another class and other students abroad, a more exciting venture is to make the exchange live. Live interactive webcasting may be difficult to set up on your own, but a new venture through a site called EFLBridges <<http://www.eflbridges.com>> makes it easier to involve your students in live voice and chat webcasts. Using the free Internet telephony software Skype <<http://www.skype.com>>, students can call in and chat to other students from around the world.

The first live EFL student webcast at this site was held in February, 2006, and is available as a podcast for listening to from the EFL Bridges site. If any of your students are interested in taking part in a future live interactive webcast, then signing up for an account at EFLBridges is the first step. By doing this, you will be kept abreast of future

webcasts. You are welcome to encourage your students to register at the site, and to join in future webcasts.

Another exciting aspect of podcasting involves the use of video. *Video podcasting* (often referred to as *videoblogging* or *vlogging*) is showing signs of being an important development in the future., and some automatic podcasting sites such as **Podomatic** allow the recording of video as well as audio. Although essentially, a video file is simply an audio file with pictures, it is harder to produce engaging content, and editing is more difficult too. Because of this, it still remains to be seen just how important video podcasting will become as an aid for language learning and language learners.

6. References and Further Reading

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