

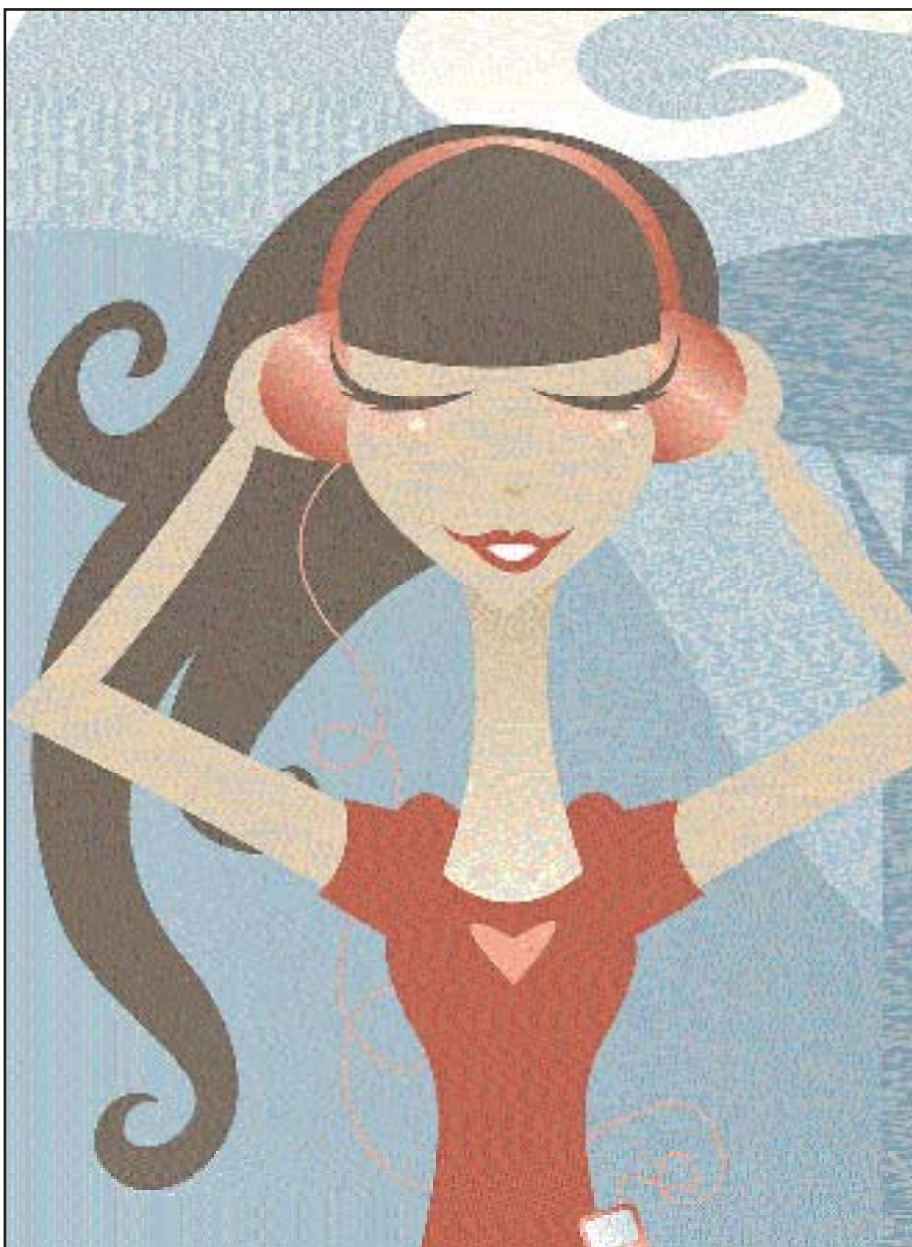
Podcasting de-mystified

by Thomas N. Robb

"Podcasting" is a popular buzzword these days, but the name itself is misleading since there are many applications for EFL based on this technology that require neither iPods nor broadcasting capability. In its pure form, audio files that you or your students create should be available for automatic downloading through software on the user's end that can automatically check for and download newly created audio files. While this is an exciting possibility, it isn't a requirement for effective classroom use. Keep reading!

Podcasting consists of two basic elements, the recording of audio as an MP3 file, and then its dissemination to others, which in its pure form, is by an "RSS feed" that others can subscribe to and download (including any new recordings or updates) to their own computer or audio device. This however, may not be needed for some applications.

The rise in popularity of podcasting actually allows the reincarnation of activity types that have recently fallen into disuse. In the 70s and 80s, it was common for teachers to have their students record their own voice for various types of practice activities, such as the practice of specific segmental phonemes, or "pair taping" activities where the students had to record their own conversations. With the demise of the cassette recorder, however, it became impossible for instructors to give such assignments. Now with digital recording, it is back, and in a form that is easier than ever to use and with greater functionality.



While there may be many reasons why you, as a teacher might not think that podcasting is suitable for your students, the lack of an iPod should not be one of them. Students don't need an iPod nor any other form of portable audio recorder to listen to a "podcast"; these devices only allow the listen-

ing to become a portable "any time, any where" experience. As long as students have access to the Internet, they will be still able to access your "podcasts", albeit in a tethered-to-computer mode.

Creating your sound files
Podcasts are typically stored in

While it is possible to create sound files on most computers, in order to edit the file and save it in mp3 format, you will need software such as Audacity, which is available in either PC or Mac versions. While editing software is not strictly necessary, it allows you to cut, copy and paste segments, and thus makes the experience faster, less frustrating and yields a more professional result.

Making your sound files available

If you aren't interested in the RSS broadcast capability, you can simply make your files available as links on a web page, or inside your course management system such as WebCT, Blackboard or Moodle. In the case of Moodle, it is easy to establish an RSS feed for your sounds which makes it a true "podcast." See the "Language Learning" area at <http://moodle.org> for further details. A more convenient way is to use a free browser-based service such as <http://www.odeo.com> or <http://www.podomatic.com> which allows you (and your students) to create an account, record and broadcast your creations. While both sites do offer a browser-based recording function, they recommend Audacity for better quality results.

Activities for podcasting

As with most other Internet-based activities, there are two basic modes, 1) students as consumers: you, as the instructor, create material for your students or assign them to listen to one of the many available ESL podcast sites. and 2) students as producers or publishers: you have your students create material for others to listen to. A third mode mode is simply for the students to create audio files as a means for practicing pronunciation, intonation or general fluency where the files are not meant for outside consumption.

Mode 1 -- Students as consumers

With any activity of this nature the instructor has to be sure to build in some sort of quiz or final product so that students can demonstrate that they have actually performed the activity. You might ask them to write a short report or give one verbally in class, or give them a short quiz from the podcast in class.

- a. Comprehension practice -- You create some material for supplementary comprehension activities of material in your main textbook. This could take the form of questions on the listening material, a closed activity or a dictation.
- b. Sound discrimination activities -- set of words, pairs that are same or different or sets where the student has to find the odd man out.
- c. Jigsaw listening -- Students in groups of 2 or 3 listen to

different audio files and then have to combine the information to come up with the solution to the activity.

- d. Feedback -- Give your students feedback on their assignments with audio instead of writing.

Mode 2 -- Students to the world.

- a. Audio reviews of their favorite movies
- b. Interviews with other students or teachers on specific topics
- c. Introductions to local sightseeing spots
- d. Their comments on projects produced by other class members.
- e. Anything that you might have them write a composition on.

Mode 3 -- Student practice.

a. After students have practiced a sentence or passage in class that focuses on perfect pronunciation of a target sound, or overall sentence intonation and rhythm, they then have to record their best rendition of the sentence as homework.

b. Students alone or in pairs record a jazz chant after it has been practiced in class.

c. Students record their own rendition of a conversation from the textbook materials trying to make it sound as close to the original as possible.

d. Students do a "pair taping" activity where they try to have a free-flow conversation within a specified time limit on a topic of their own choosing, or from a list of suggested topics.

e. Shadowing tasks, where students try to repeat, with a slight delay what they hear, and

f. A set of rapid-fire questions to which the students must prepare their own answers within the space allowed on the recording.

Some Podcasting Sites

English as a Second Language Podcast: <http://www.eslpod.com>

EFLBridges: <http://www.eflbridges.com/>

ITESLJ Links: <http://iteslj.org/links/ESL/Listening/Podcasts/>

Voice of America: <http://www.voanews.com/specialenglish/index.cfm>

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