

A Multi-media Lab On Your Desktop

Greg Kessler

The popularity of MP3 players has taken the business and entertainment world by storm. Apple's popular iPod has proven to be a business miracle, consumer must-have and fashion statement. As portable devices have grown in popularity and availability, the software, hardware and communities that involve them continue to offer more to language teachers and students. In order to get an idea of how digital audio and portable devices have impacted language education, let's first recall how tape-based audio labs have typically functioned.

The audio lab provided students a new opportunity to be exposed to target language recordings for the first time. However, they offered a fairly limited set of experiences. Often, tapes would break, get lost or degrade to the point where they became inaudible. Student access to materials was also limited to open lab times. Fortunately, digital audio and portable recording devices now offer us a much more flexible environment for in-class and self-access listening and speaking activities. These digital solutions also expand the functionality so that students can experience a much wider breadth of authentic materials. Therefore, in addition to all of the activities that were possible with the traditional audio labs, there are now opportunities for students to record themselves nearly anywhere they desire, conduct interviews with native speakers, listen to up-to-the-minute news and share these recordings with students, teachers and the general public.

What is Podcasting?

In order to make the most of these new resources, let's take a look at what podcasting is, how it works, how you can receive it and even how you can get information to become a podcaster yourself. Podcasting is a form of audio and /or video broadcasting that allows anyone to create their own radio station. Not technically limited to the World Wide Web, which is the portion of the Internet that is viewed by web browsers such as Mozilla, Firefox, Internet Explorer, Netscape and AOL, podcasts can be accessed in varied ways. Further, podcasts can be automatically transferred or updated to MP3 players such as the Apple iPod. Many traditional news outlets are quite active in podcasting, but there are also many non-traditional sources of information available that can serve as authentic and meaningful content. Podcasting has recently begun to specifically address the needs and interests of the TESOL community.

Podcasting Resources

Nearly every media company has some sort of podcast today. A comprehensive collection of podcasts can be found within Apple's iTunes, categorized by areas of interest, but many may reside in more than one category (For example, Harry Shearer's National Public Radio show, *LeShow*, is found in both Politics and Comedy). Once you identify a podcast of interest, you can subscribe to it through RSS feed. This means that you can schedule any updates as you determine appropriate. This subscription service allows you to make many recordings available to students with minimal effort in downloading and staying up-to-date on what is available. All of this can easily be

accomplished by using a program like Apple's iTunes.

| [\[Ellen: sidebar these?\]](#)

General podcasts that may be useful in the language classroom include:

- Newsweek
- The New York Times
- National Public Radio
- BBC

Podcasts that are specifically geared toward ESL/EFL include:

- [Breakingnewsenglish.com](http://breakingnewsenglish.com)
 - This unique site offers a collection of audio recordings as well as instructional materials all based upon recent news events. Teachers can take these materials directly to the classroom for exploration of current events.
 - According to the site: "All of these current events and business English lesson plans contain a news article, listening (MP3 file), podcast, communication activities, pair work, discussion, reading and vocabulary exercises. Classroom handouts are reproducible in Word and PDF."
 - Each lesson is available in two levels of difficulty: easier and harder. Topics cover a wide range of interest. The podcasts associated with BreakingNewsEnglish are also downloadable by themselves and can be scheduled using an rss (Really Simple Syndication) feed. This technology allows users to schedule updates of podcasts, weblogs and news sites (among other things) to be automatically downloaded and/or updated according to a schedule.
- <http://iteslj.org/links/ESL/Listening/Podcasts/>
 - A comprehensive collection of many different podcasts intended for ESL/EFL audiences. Currently containing over 30 podcasts, links to podcast software and instructions on how to use and access podcasts. Maintained by Charles and Larry Kelly, who have offered comprehensive collections of web-based materials for years, this resource is bound to be useful and current for a long time.
- <http://www.englishcaster.com/blogs>
 - English Idioms and Slang provides podcasts that offer explanations in context for a variety of idioms and slang.
- <http://englishcaster.com/bobrob/>
 - The Bob and Rob show is a very interesting podcast put together by two teachers in Japan. It addresses issues of culture, idioms, language and vocabulary. Presented as a discussion and variety show between the two hosts, it is extremely fun and informative.

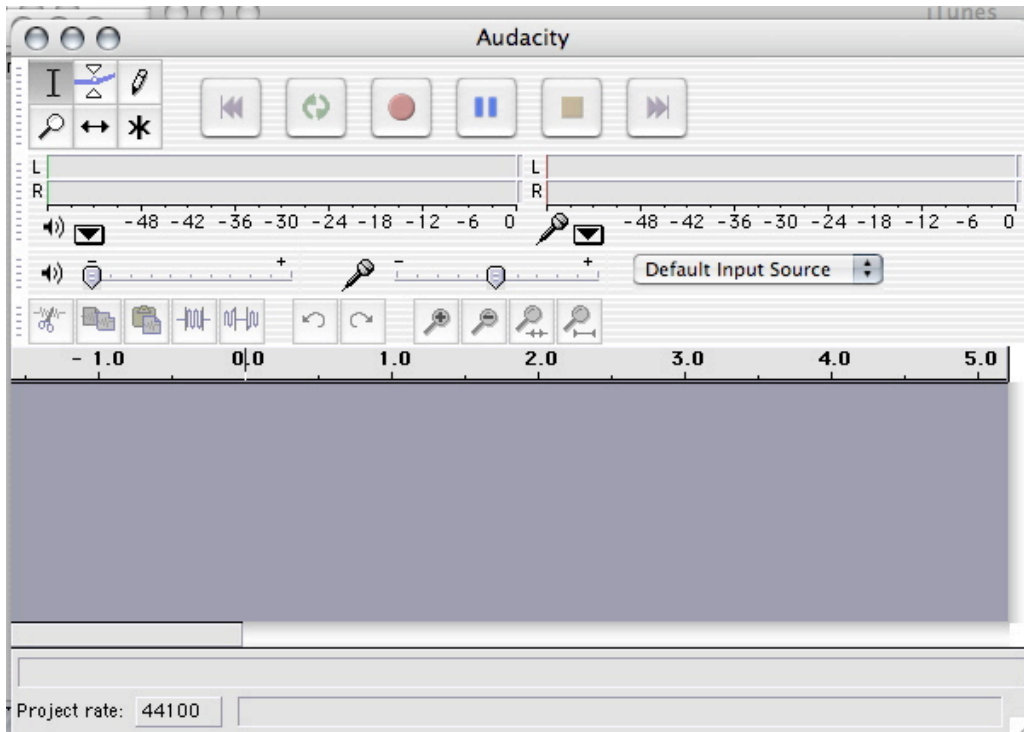


Apple's iTunes Podcast Listings

Getting Started Yourself

As a CALL trainer I have helped a number of teachers begin to work with the new types of digital audio. In addition to learning to record and exchange files, I have helped many of them get their own podcasts started. Once they get started, teachers are amazed at what they can do. They find that using these materials is easy and rewarding providing they have the proper equipment. A quality headset and speakers will greatly improve the experience. Students like the flexibility and variety. They also seem to be willing to engage in more English practice using these technologies than they did using a traditional audio lab. Teachers and students have both responded positively to the integration of these digital audio materials.

It is actually a lot easier than you might expect to create your own digital audio. There are a number of free programs available to record your own audio. Audacity (<http://audacity.sourceforge.net/>) is one of the best free programs currently available. It is very easy to use and mimics the conventional controls of a cassette recorder. Once files are saved in an MP3 format they can be transferred to the Internet for all to utilize. If you have access to a server through your school or your personal Internet service provider (ISP), the entire process would cost you nothing. Many people have such access without knowing it; contact your ISP support staff or school technology support staff to find out.



Audacity Window

Lesson Ideas

By utilizing interactive quiz building tools such as those included in most CMSs, or the popular hot potatoes (<http://hotpot.uvic.ca/>), I frequently integrate these audio recordings into multimedia materials that include readings, videos, audio, drag and drop matching exercises, crossword puzzles and more. For a great example of such materials that use online movie trailers as the content, you should see <http://english-trailers.com>.

In addition to podcasting, my colleagues and I rely on sharing digital audio files. Pre-recorded, teacher-recorded and student-recorded audio files are exchanged through email, over an intranet and through a course management system (CMS). We use both Moodle and Blackboard CMSs to share these files and maintain a variety of interaction. The use of a course management system also allows these files to be exchanged as a single component of a more global interaction. Students can attach the files to forums to augment their written text. They can transcribe their recordings in such a forum. They can even take other students' audio recordings and edit them to insert their own responses, thus creating a cohesive dialogue. These dialogues can be used as classroom material or even collected for research. With the ability to collect recordings on a DVD, CD, File server, or other storage device, there is virtually no limit to the amount of content that you can ultimately archive. The ability to easily and quickly exchange audio recordings from any location allows teachers to be more creative with peer response activities and have more frequent (and varied) interaction with students. In the International Teaching Associate classes at Ohio University, for example, students are recording themselves and exchanging files with classmates and the teacher through the use of a Moodle.

Some of our classes have utilized a shared library of songs on a local file server that automatically updates the material on the students' iPods each time that it is plugged into

any computer in our building. Each class can have its own playlist and these can be updated as necessary from any computer on the network. This automaticity eliminates many of the problems that may occur with portable devices. We can be assured that our students have the required listening files.

We have been using the iPods in our classes for almost two years. So far, the students have reported that it is much easier and more comfortable to do aural/oral activities from their apartments or iPods than in the traditional audio lab (which we still offer as an option). Thus, many of them are spending more time engaged in assigned activities and often do things that extend beyond the minimum requirements of an assignment. The recordings also sound more natural since the traditional lab often had students whispering or otherwise speaking in a manner that demonstrated the self-conscious nature of being in a room with many other people who could be eavesdropping. We can only hope that this increased comfort and ease translates into greater success with language.

What Else Can be Done?

Teachers and students can easily create their own podcasts. As the technology becomes more common, more programs are becoming available to make podcasts. All you need is an [Internet](#) connection and some audio software or recordings. Podcasts can be received on conventional computers, the ability to use them with portable MP3 players is even more promising. Using either of the free programs (ipodderx for Mac) and (ipodder.net for Windows) you can easily save, or schedule automated updates of podcast audio to your portable MP3 player. By using one of these programs you can create an archive, or library, of useful audio content for your students. Such files could be stored on CD, DVD or a file server for student access.

With microphones on many MP3 players now, students can also interact with a podcast by recording responses, reactions and comments of their own. They may even want to begin their own podcast. Once you and your students begin using this technology you may want to have students engage in peer response activities using these recordings. This approach can help them engage in communicating with one another more than they might face to face and it alleviates the overwhelming load of grading that you might have to do otherwise. [Teacher input is always important as well and some find it useful to assess student recordings based on a checklist of goals. Peer review can also contribute to a better ability to self-evaluate, an ability that empowers students. Easily duplicated digital files allow convenient access, perhaps increasing the amount of time students engage with these materials.](#)

Once you get started you may find these experiences so exciting that you need to share. Similarly, you may find that your students create materials that are so interesting that others must see them. If this is the case, you can visit the collaborative collection of ESL podcasts at <http://a4esl.org/p/>

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