
Splendid Speaking Articles



Topic: Introduction to Podcasting

Peter Travis gives an introduction to the podcast.

This article, first appeared in the *ETP* (English Teaching Professional) in September 2007.

Did you know that the basic constituent of aspirin comes from the willow tree and has been used for thousands of years for pain relief? Where did I discover this? On the way to work actually, listening to one of my favourite podcasts published by Warwick University. I'd downloaded this one a few days before and had been waiting for a few spare moments to listen to it.

Podcasts tend to be quite short, anything from five to 15 minutes in most cases, which means you can easily fit them in at various times of the day. The fact that I can remember this piece of trivia speaks volumes for my learning style and points to another great advantage of podcasts. For our auditory learners, listening can be a great help and even learners with no particular learning style will find listening a nice addition to reading. And, of course, for language learners podcasts offer so much extra authentic listening material.

But with so many other things to do, you're probably thinking '*I haven't got time to learn all about podcasting, I'm far too busy to learn all that complicated technical stuff.*' Well, the good news is that podcasting is surprisingly easy to pick up, both as a consumer and a producer: yes, you too – and your students – could join the growing army of independent radio broadcasters!

What exactly is a podcast?

Let's start by defining a podcast. The term is made up of *pod*, which comes from *iPod*, the name of Apple's popular MP3 player, and *cast* from *broadcast*. A podcast is essentially an audio file, often referred to as an MP3 file, MP3 being the file type, in the same way that a 'doc' file is a word document and a 'jpeg' is an image file. Hence an MP3 player like the iPod plays MP3 files. There are other types of audio file but MP3 is one of the most common. And there are lots of MP3 players, too, including PCs, laptops and mobile phones.

Podcasts are often described as 'radio shows' and generally speaking will consist of a series of shows published on a regular basis. You can subscribe to the podcast and will

then be notified when a new episode is published or you can even have it delivered directly to your computer as it becomes available!

What's in it for me and my students?

As a language teacher you've probably been using audio with your students for years. So what can podcasting offer you that's new? Let's imagine you want your students to listen to a recording. Until recently, you'd take the tape or CD into class and play it to your students. But what if your students wanted to listen to it again at home or during a self-access period? What about Ana who missed the lesson because she had to return home to Spain on business?

Now imagine a different scenario. You know Ana's email address, so you email her a web link to a website containing a podcast you're going to play in class. In class, you play the recording to your students, and after the lesson, during a self-study period, some of them listen again thanks to that web link you gave out. Meanwhile, in Spain, after breakfast, Ana reads your email, goes to the link and has a quick listen. She's leaving for the office soon, so she downloads the file to her MP3 player to listen to on the way to work.

And there's more! Once upon a time, if you wanted to produce your own show, you'd need lots of expensive equipment and expertise. But because it's so cheap and easy to become a podcaster – anyone can do it – there are huge numbers of them appearing on the scene. Which means more choice for us and for our learners. Go to Google and do a search on *podcasts* and you'll find millions – literally. Do a search on *podcast + "learning English"* The result? Over a million hits. (Using double quotes will mean Google searches for pages in which the two words appear together, not simply pages with the words *learning* and *English* in them). Do you need a specific subject? Try *podcast and travel*. In fact the more relevant words you add to the search the more targeted the results will be. (There's no need for a + sign between words in Goggle). What better way to motivate your learners than to offer them authentic listening material about subjects they're interested in!

But wait, there's even more! Supposing your students like a show they've found. They might like to listen to further episodes on a regular basis. You'll often hear people who talk about podcasting using the term *RSS*, which stands for *really simple syndication*. An *RSS feed* is simply a way of subscribing to a podcast or blog. An analogy often used is that of your favourite magazine. If you know of a newsagent where it's sold, you can always pop in and buy it whenever you have time. However, for convenience sake, you might decide to have the publisher deliver it direct to your house. Well, that's exactly what an RSS feed does: it notifies you of a new episode so that you can download it yourself or it will even deliver it to your computer automatically, without you having to remember to do a thing. You can then listen to it on your PC or transfer it across to your MP3 player and listen on the way to work, whilst out jogging or whenever it suits you. Finally, if you can't find what you're looking for or you'd like to get involved yourself and encourage your students to become podcasters, it couldn't be easier. There are lots of teachers around the world creating their own podcasts, often featuring their own students. But more on how to do that in my next article.

Where can I find them?

We've already touched on one way to search for podcasts: simply doing a search in Google, Yahoo or your own favourite search engine. This can be the quickest way to locate a podcast on a particular subject. However, there are a growing number of 'portals' or websites that feature podcasts specifically, some aimed at particular subjects – like learning English!

One of my own favourites can be found at <http://a4esl.org>.

This includes the 20 latest English language podcasts which the site offers links to.

Englishcaster is another site with a focus on ESL podcasts:

www.englishcaster.com/

General educational podcasts, including English language learning, can be found at EPN:

www.epnweb.org/

A UK-based portal Recap, with links to excellent podcasts can be found at

<http://recap.ltd.uk/podcasting/index.php>.

Finally there are general podcast portals, which will have an educational category but also many other areas. As with the web generally, there will inevitably be some podcasts that you may find inappropriate for your students:

www.allpodcasts.com

www.podcastalley.com

www.podcast.net/

<http://podcasts.yahoo.com/>

How can I listen to them?

When you first come across a website containing podcasts, you'll probably simply click on the *Play* button that accompanies each episode to find what it's like. If you like what you hear, you can then download it to your computer either to listen to again later or to play to your students in class, where you may have no internet connection. Place the cursor over the *Download* link and click the right mouse button. What you select next depends on what browser you have. Select *Save Target As ...*, (Internet Explorer & Opera) or *Save Link As...* (Firefox) or *Download Linked File* (Apple Safari). You can then download the file to a location on your computer to listen to later.

If that's about as involved as you want to get as a consumer of podcasts, you could leave it at that. However, you'd be missing out on one of the big advantages of podcasting. If you find a podcast that's really useful, you won't want to miss the next episode, so the subscription opportunity offered with podcasting comes in very handy. So how do you subscribe?

First you'll need to have access to a tool for reading RSS feeds or what is often called a *podcatcher*. There are basically two methods you can use to do this:

1 Install software on your PC or laptop which will download a podcast you subscribe to automatically. The most popular tool of this kind is iTunes, Apple's music store. You can download iTunes from the Apple website: www.apple.com.

Another popular podcatcher is Juice, which is designed specifically for podcasts:
<http://juicereceiver.sourceforge.net/>.

2 Rather than installing software on your computer, you can use a service that lives on the Internet. You simply create an account and login to the service in the same way you would a Hotmail or Yahoo email account. The difference between this and iTunes is that a web-based podcatcher will not download the podcast automatically. It will simply show when you next login that a new episode has been published and you're then free to download it manually. My favourite online service is Netvibes. You'll find a help sheet to show you how to get started with Netvibes here:
<http://www.splendid-speaking.com/community/>

Once you have your podcatcher, it's simply a question of adding your RSS feed. Links to RSS feeds from the podcast service will often look like this:



You'll find detailed instructions on how to add the link in the Netvibes help sheet.

How can I use them?

How you use ready-made podcasts with your students is really down to your own ingenuity, but here are a few suggestions.

1 Find podcasts that relate to the topics in the coursebook your class is using and use them for extra listening practice in class.

2 We've already seen how podcasts offer the opportunity for real 'mobile learning' and your students can listen to recordings at a time and place that suits them, so podcasts can be ideal for self-directed learning. Add a (printable) worksheet for a task-based activity for your students to use before, while and/or after listening. Does the podcast feature particular vocabulary or grammar points you want to focus on? Why not include links to websites that offer practice in those areas of language for students to work on before or after they listen.

3 Ask students to take turns to write a review of a podcast to be placed in the self-access centre. They could work to a template like this:

- Topic
- Type of English (British/American/Australian/etc)
- Useful vocabulary
- My review

4 Get students to transcribe (sections of) a podcast they've found. This gives great listening practice and is good for vocabulary or grammar development. Students can create cloze exercises taken from sections of the podcast and give them to other students to complete.

5 Use podcasts as the basis for project work. Get the students to find a podcast that interests them and to use it as part of their project presentation or as input for a piece of written work.

6 For advanced learners use podcasts as an exercise in register. Students listen to topics covered in more informal conversational style and then re-write the content in the form of a semi-formal article or formal report.

7 Finally, there are all the possibilities that emerge with podcasts generated by your own students, which we'll be looking at in the next issue of *ETp*.

And that's about all you need to know to become an efficient consumer of podcasts. To sum up what we've said:

- They're very flexible to use.
- They offer a way of subscribing to new content.
- There are lots of them.
- They're easy to make.
- They'll make an enormous addition to your teaching resources and teaching tools.

In the next issue: How to make your own podcasts.

Peter Travis is the co-founder of Flo-Joe, a website for Cambridge Exam preparation. He also manages the Splendid Speaking website at www.splendid-speaking.com, which features podcasts of students participating in exam-style interviews.

info@splendid-speaking.com