

A word in your ear: podcasting for dummies

Martin McMorro m.s.mcmorrow@massey.ac.nz

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Martin McMorro is a learning advisor at Massey University, New Zealand. He also moderates an online discussion board for the IATEFL Teacher Training and Education SIG at <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/ttedsig> and is a distance student on the D Appl Ling programme at Macquarie University.

A podcast is an audio file that's hosted on an internet site. In my case, I registered (for free) with a site called Podomatic. I spend about an hour or so making a daily programme of 15 minutes audio plus text on the screen. To make a programme, all you need is a microphone attached to your computer. You just click on the webpage where it says 'post new episode' and follow some very simple on-screen instructions – and pod's your uncle!

I've gradually jazzed up my podcast with photos and music snippets – and upgraded to paid membership so that I get extra storage. Nowadays, I record my show using a free program called 'Audacity' for better sound quality and basic mixing. So another (unexpected) benefit of podcasting is that it allows you to develop some rudimentary IT skills at your own pace - and unlike most on-the-job training, you can delete your mistakes before anyone else gets to see them.

But I don't have one hour a day for podcasting!

Few teachers have - I'm lucky, in this respect! On the other hand, I do have 2000 international students to look after. So podcasting is one way of reaching out to this large community and offering them ongoing support and encouragement to develop their language skills and, at the same time, engage more actively with the broader 'Western' culture which surrounds them. But for busy classroom teachers, podcasting could still be an option as a weekly or monthly extra – to provide consolidation, revision, extension etc of language or topics covered in class. It's easier than you think – and a means of building up a broader community of your students – past, present and future!

But what does your podcast offer your students that they're not getting elsewhere?

Most international students who study at Western universities do so not primarily to learn about finance, management etc. They could do this more easily, cheaply and efficiently in many cases by staying at home. The reason they make such extraordinary sacrifices is fundamentally to access the 'hidden curriculum' of globalisation: developing their English language skills and understanding 'Western Culture' is their passkey to this (perhaps mythical) world of opportunity.

Sadly, but inevitably, this hidden curriculum gets squeezed out: International ESOL students tend to have to 'short-cut' their way through university – sidelining these longer-term learning opportunities. It's not their fault – it's a basic – and actually admirable – survival strategy. My podcast is intended to act as a kind of English Language and Culture energy bar for these overstressed students! For 30 minutes a day, students can put grades and schedules (both lecture and work) to the back of their minds and chew their way through a daily dose of

language and culture. At their own pace, in their own space, for their own reasons. With nobody to please but themselves. In this way, listening to a daily podcast is a bit like a prayer or meditation – a chance in any case to cocoon yourself from the daily grind for a few minutes to reconnect with your fundamental needs and aspirations. It's a privilege as a teacher to be able to engage with students at such an intimate and personal level. Perhaps other teachers would also enjoy the chance to let their students hear their other voice – not the public address announcer, but ... a word in their ear.

How do the students use it – and how do they even know it's there?

The great thing about podcasting is that it's very easy – both for the creator and the user – and it's instant. Within a minute, whatever you record is accessible to anyone who opens the webpage. They can either listen to it there and then or download it and listen to it on their computer, iPod or Mp3 player later. More tech-savvy users can subscribe through i-tunes etc and have it 'fed' automatically to their media player.

The hard work with podcasting comes in trying to get the word out to potential users. In my case, I include the link in a daily email to all the international students on campus. I also send links to colleagues, put posters around the campus and in the local supermarkets, include links on university webpages etc. What's interesting is that, after a while you become aware of two secondary audiences - students and teachers around the world who've stumbled upon your podcast. Out of these three audiences, the only people who ever give you feedback are those other teachers. Students NEVER give any feedback – if it wasn't for the statistics you can see on the site, I'd never know anyone ever used it!

What do you put in your podcast

Each of my podcasts includes:

- **Listening practice:** About 15 minutes of me explaining vocabulary and going over questions related to a linked article – once or twice a week this is another 15 minute audio extract from a radio show
- **Reading practice:** Accompanying text on the screen divided into five parts – as well as linked newspaper articles

All of this is intended to focus on four elements of the 'hidden curriculum' I mentioned above:

- building up general and academic English vocabulary
- developing reading and writing skills
- learning more about 'Western' culture(s)
- engaging critically (in English) with academic issues

The vocabulary objective is achieved through a focus on one academic word a day. This is linked to another site which I have produced www.academicenglishgenerator.com which depends heavily on the work done by a colleague at Massey University – Averil Coxhead. So, I start off the podcast by explaining the word, giving examples and a short test. Later in the podcast I also explain 5 – 10 difficult words and phrases which come up in the linked newspaper or radio text.

These texts are chosen to fulfill the other three objectives mentioned above. The audio texts come from the BBC or Radio New Zealand. The articles also come from the BBC or from a range of newspapers and magazines. There isn't any need to ask permission for any of these articles or radio extracts, since I don't host the articles myself – I just provide a link to their websites. I aim to cover a wide range of academic topics – over the last two weeks alone, users will have engaged with topics from the fields of management, human resources, marketing, neurology, sociology, ecology, psychology, history, gender studies and meteorology (that is to say, a weather forecast!). And within these fields, they'll have had the chance to hone their critical thinking on issues such as social responsibility of business, the role of genetics and environment in gender, and to become more familiar with basic research methods.

And finally, to offer a lighter look at our local culture, I include a daily quiz question and a photo of a New Zealand scene. The fact is that if students listen to the podcast and do all the exercises, it will give them about 30 – 45 minutes' practice per day. If that's not enough, they can scroll down the page and find another 60 or more episodes, giving them 30 hours or so of more practice. But let's be realistic – they won't! Life's too short!

And how are other teachers using podcasting?

A number of teachers use it in the same way as I do – to provide listening material for their students. It's not that difficult to add video – (though too difficult for me currently)! And most teachers are more adventurous than me, including interviews and dialogues for students. But the next step is to get the students themselves making the podcasts. This meshes very well with a task-based approach – a podcast is an excellent project for students to work on collaboratively towards a clear goal.

Traditionally, teachers have always used the classroom walls to showcase the products of these student projects. A podcast is a logical development of this – an audio classroom wall where students can hang their speaking performances for all the world to hear! It offers great opportunities for students to learn about and play with different genres, such as radio ads, news broadcasts, chat shows etc.

The podcasts from St. Clare's College, Oxford, UK (www.bardwellroad.podomatic.com) and St Georges TAFE, Sydney, Australia (www.rosao.podomatic.com) are excellent examples. They would, I think, be very good materials to use with other students – they are interesting authentic texts in themselves and also show what students can do when given the opportunity. In a word – podtastic!