

Utilizing Podcasts in Virtual EFL Instruction

Due to the COVID pandemic, many English language programs have shifted to virtual learning, and students and teachers alike rely more than ever on technology to advance learning. One such technology is podcasts, which are audio files published as episodes that listeners can stream through apps on their phone or computer. Through podcasts, students can receive authentic English input, even outside the classroom. While all podcasts performed in English provide listening input, podcasts led by trained teachers are particularly beneficial for students.

Podcasts have traditionally been a tool for passive listening practice, but episodes can in fact be easily incorporated into the curriculum with pre- and post-activities to support students in the development of all skills (Nurmukhamedov and Sadler 2011; O'Brien and Hegelheimer 2007). In this article, I draw on empirical evidence as well as my experience to introduce the benefits of including podcasts in virtual English as a foreign language (EFL) instruction; I then outline activity and lesson-plan ideas for utilizing pre-made EFL podcasts, original podcasts, and general audience podcasts.

BENEFITS OF UTILIZING PODCASTS

There are empirically proven benefits of learning through podcasts. Regarding the nature of podcasting platforms, podcasts are beneficial because of device mobility and convenience (Chaikovska 2018; Jowitt 2008). Episodes are available—for free—on nearly every technological device, so students can listen to podcasts at all times: while driving, shopping, cleaning the house,

and so forth (Thorne and Payne 2005). This feature “extends the limited class time” that is available to teachers and students (O'Brien and Hegelheimer 2007, 175). Additionally, extensive material is available: As of May 2022, over 65 million podcast episodes had been published (Brooke 2022). This huge amount of material enables learners to access authentic, unplanned speech with flexible topics and formats (Chaikovska 2018; Jowitt 2008).

Students also have positive perceptions of learning through podcasts; according to a study that incorporated podcasts into ESL curriculum, students typically listened to assigned episodes more than once (O'Brien and Hegelheimer 2007), suggesting that they enjoyed them. Other research demonstrates that students like learning through podcasts (Ducate and Lomicka 2009; Hasan and Hoon 2012; Li 2010; Wachiraya 2019), specifically due to their authentic speech and opportunities for autonomy and self-paced learning (see Arvanitis [2019] and Brett [1995] for further benefits of multimedia learning).

English teachers can use podcasts as a resource to support all skills.

Podcasts enable students to choose what they want to learn or practice, and when they want to do so. This flexibility is a powerful tool to increase motivation. In fact, studies indicate that learning through podcasts promotes students' intrinsic motivation (Chaikovska 2018; Hasan and Hoon 2012; O'Brien and Hegelheimer 2007) and confidence (Hasan and Hoon 2012). Additionally, students believe that listening to podcasts helps them improve their English skills (Wachiraya 2019).

Not only do students believe that podcasts help them learn, but research indicates that podcasts do, in fact, help students improve their English skills. Namely, listening to podcasts has been shown to improve learners' listening skills (Ashraf, Noroozi, and Salami 2011; Ducate and Lomicka 2009; Al Qasim and Al Fadda 2013) and their speaking skills and vocabulary knowledge (Ducate and Lomicka 2009). These findings stem from podcasts that have traditionally been used as a resource for extensive listening practice. However, English teachers can use podcasts as a resource to support all skills. By modifying typical classroom activities to a podcast format, teachers can capitalize on the benefits of the activity itself in addition to all the benefits of podcasts discussed above. The

following section addresses creative ways of implementing podcasts in the virtual classroom to help students improve all English skills.

ACTIVITY IDEAS FOR PODCASTS

Three kinds of podcasts that are beneficial for students are (1) pre-made podcasts from other EFL teachers that give students focused practice on class content; (2) original podcasts created by teachers that personalize content for students; and (3) general audience podcasts geared towards native English speakers that provide rich learning material for all skills in classroom instruction.

In the following sections, I describe how teachers can implement these three kinds of podcasts in their classrooms.

1. Pre-Made EFL Podcasts

Pre-made podcasts geared towards English learners—called discrete category and ESL-focused podcasts by Nurmukhamedov and Sadler (2011)—have many advantages in the classroom. Teachers can recommend EFL podcasts to students, assign them as homework, or use them in class as listening exercises along with pre- and post-activities.

Podcast Title (search title to access site)	Podcast Description	Strengths	Other Observations
<i>Activate Your IELTS: Be Determined</i>	*Advanced *Test prep	✓ Has interviews with other experts ✓ Has student success stories	✓ Additional masterclasses are available for a fee ✓ Has tips mainly about the writing and speaking sections ✓ Includes much metalanguage (e.g., word families, shwa)
	Episodes include pronunciation tips, grammar mini-lessons, test-taking strategies, IELTS essay-writing tips, and overcoming common hurdles		
	Episodes released twice a week		
	20–30 minutes each		

Table 1. Pre-made EFL podcasts

Podcast Title (search title to access site)	Podcast Description	Strengths	Other Observations
<i>All Ears English Podcast</i>	*Intermediate *Advanced	✓ Has review episodes ✓ Has cultural topics ✓ Has professional audio ✓ The hosts speak quickly but clearly	✓ Access to an app with extra practice is available for a fee ✓ Does not mention grammar ✓ Does not explain words or expressions from conversations
	Episodes include introduction to new vocabulary (e.g., phrasal verbs, slang) and authentic conversations about interesting topics		
	Episodes released every day (over 1,500 episodes)		
	10–15 minutes each		
<i>Better at English</i>	*Intermediate *Advanced	✓ Has links to other videos/resources in the episode descriptions ✓ Access to transcripts and vocabulary notes is available for free online ✓ Has an enthusiastic host ✓ Has guest speakers with different accents	✓ Does not include grammar lessons
	Episodes include authentic conversations with guests of different genders and accents, tips on resources for English learning, and brief stories from the host's life		
	Episodes released every other week		
	10–30 minutes each		
<i>Business English Pod</i>	*Advanced *Business English	✓ Listeners can download episodes from their website ✓ Has summaries and listening questions in the episode descriptions ✓ Has task-based lessons (e.g., ending a phone call, interview tips, how to get a year-end bonus) ✓ Has multiple guest speakers for interviews and dialogues	✓ Access to a website with extra practice is available for a fee (free trial available) ✓ Dialogues follow a script
	Episodes include stories and lessons related to business English, including advanced vocabulary that is explained in detail (e.g., "furlough," "leeway," "strategic planning")		
	Episodes released every other week		
	10–25 minutes each		
<i>Culips Everyday English Podcast</i>	*Beginning *Intermediate	✓ Has summaries of main points in the episode descriptions ✓ All explanations have examples ✓ Has multiple guest speakers ✓ Has an enthusiastic host	✓ Access to a website with extra practice is available for a fee
	Episode types include Catch Word (introduction to slang or idioms), Jeremy's English Tips (grammar mini-lessons), Simplified Speech (authentic conversations followed by an explanation of certain words and expressions), and Fluency Files (stories told by a single host)		
	Episodes released twice a week		
	15–25 minutes each		

Table 1. Pre-made EFL podcasts (continued)

Podcast Title (search title to access site)	Podcast Description	Strengths	Other Observations
<i>Daily Easy English Expression Podcast</i>	*High beginning *Intermediate *Advanced	✓ Has complete explanations of expression parts (e.g., "whistle") and full expressions (e.g., "clean as a whistle") ✓ Has transcripts of dialogues in the episode descriptions ✓ Has short episodes that can be easily incorporated into a daily routine	✓ Conversations are spoken by only one host using silly (and sometimes distracting) voices
	Episodes include introduction to new words, phrasal verbs, or idioms followed by example dialogues		
	Episodes released every week		
	5–10 minutes each		
<i>ESL Pod</i>	*High beginning	✓ Has task-based lessons (e.g., making hotel reservations, shopping at the supermarket)	✓ Access to a website with extra practice is available for a fee ✓ Episodes are no longer in production
	Episodes include stories told by a single host, followed by an explanation of certain words and expressions		
	25–40 minutes each		
<i>Learn English with Lizzy</i>	*Beginning *Intermediate *Advanced	✓ Has episodes for all levels ✓ Access to activities and transcripts available for free online ✓ Has an enthusiastic host	✓ Has only one host ✓ Listeners must usually follow along with a handout to reap full benefits
	Episodes include listening activities as well as activities to boost all other language skills through student engagement in speaking, writing, reading, and/or question completion		
	Episodes released twice a month		
	5–15 minutes each		
<i>Plain English</i>	*High beginning *Intermediate	✓ Has songs for each episode that include a target expression ✓ Has discussions about current events	✓ Access to a website with extra practice is available for a fee ✓ The host speaks in a monotone voice
	Episodes include stories spoken at a slower speed, followed by an explanation of certain words and expressions		
	Episodes released twice a week		
	20 minutes each		

Table 1. Pre-made EFL podcasts (continued)

The podcasts can also be somewhat personalized to each class's needs, while saving teachers time. Table 1 contains a list of free podcasts that are geared towards English language learners. One of the podcasts listed, *Learn English with Lizzy*, is intended to help students improve all

skills; many of the activity ideas listed later in Table 2 have already been created and published through this podcast.

Please note that all listed podcasts use American English, though excellent podcasts in other English varieties are plentiful.

One of the best ways to use podcasts that are personalized to your students and their needs is to create your own original podcast episodes.

Example lessons

Podcast episodes from the list in Table 1 can be integrated into EFL lessons of most skills. For instance, a teacher who wants to integrate all skills in a lesson may have students listen to a conversation from *Better at English* or *Culips Everyday English Podcast*. As a pre-listening activity, students make lists of words related to the topic of discussion. While listening, they check whether the words on their lists are used. Immediately after listening, students answer comprehension questions (either provided by the podcast narrator or prepared in advance by the teacher). Students check their answers by reading the episode transcript and highlighting the answers. They then listen to the episode again while reading along silently with the transcript. As another post-listening exercise,

the teacher may call students' attention to a feature of the narrator's pronunciation, such as intonation. Students can practice their pronunciation of this feature by reading the transcript. They continue to practice this pronunciation while engaging in their own discussion, based on questions raised by either the podcast narrator or the teacher.

These episodes can also be assigned as homework to help students preview and/or practice the material. For example, before teaching selected phrasal verbs, the teacher may assign students to listen to an episode of the *Daily Easy English Expression Podcast* that teaches the target words. Students may also be assigned on an individual basis to listen to specific episodes and share what they learned in a classroom presentation.

Skill	Activity Name	Activity Description
Listening	Listening Comprehension Questions	- The podcast host records a listening segment appropriate for the students' level. - Students receive a handout with comprehension questions for students to answer.
	Free Talk	- The podcast host discusses a topic and/or plays a language game to give students practice listening to authentic and unplanned language. - Ideas for Free Talk recordings include cultural topics (such as holidays, education, and family); "Would you rather ____" questions (choosing the best option between two choices); and spoken journals of daily events. - After listening, students receive a handout that lists words and/or expressions included in the recording along with definitions and examples, as well as blank spaces to write their own examples.
	Free Talk Interviews	- The podcast host interviews another person in this variation of a Free Talk episode. This person can be a native speaker, an EFL teacher, a family member or friend, or a student. - If the interviewee is a student, encourage them to ask questions about vocabulary and grammar as the interview progresses. - After listening, students receive a handout that lists words and/or expressions included in the recording along with definitions and examples, as well as blank spaces to write their own examples.
	Listening Jigsaw	- Students divide into three groups and listen to a podcast episode that contains one part of a story (beginning, middle, or end). - When the class meets again, students share summaries of the section they heard. Classmates work together to decide whose segment is the beginning, middle, and end of the story.

Table 2. Ideas for creating original podcasts

Skill	Activity Name	Activity Description
Speaking	Simple Call and Response	- The podcast host introduces basic responses to common questions (e.g., "How are you?" → "Fine, thanks"). - Then, the host asks questions and leaves a pause in the recording so students can respond appropriately out loud.
	Advanced Call and Response	- The podcast host introduces possible responses in culturally and/or linguistically complex situations (e.g., receiving compliments, responding to exciting news, responding to bad news). - Then, the host records one part of the situation and leaves a pause in the recording so students can respond appropriately out loud (e.g., "You speak English well" → "Thanks, I've been studying every day" or "Oh, thank you, but I still have lots of work to do").
	Free Response (Spoken)	- The podcast host asks a question and provides listeners a two- to three-minute pause so they can build their fluency by responding out loud. - This activity may be done along with Free Talk, in which the host speaks about a topic or plays a language game (e.g., Would You Rather; Two Truths and a Lie; This or That) and allows time for students to respond.
Reading	Read Along	- The podcast host reads a text at a slow pace, a medium pace, and a quick pace. - Students read along silently and/or out loud.
	Reading Fluency Builder	- The podcast host provides a short text for students to read. Leave a minute-long pause in the recording so students can silently read as much as possible. - Students mark how much they read on their papers. - Repeat this exercise three more times so that students read more and more each time.
	Summarizing	- Students read several short texts ahead of time. They may write their own summaries of each text as well. - The podcast host summarizes the texts. - Listeners match the spoken summary to the written text.
Writing	Word-Level Dictation	- The podcast host reads target words from a lesson or vocabulary list. - Listeners write the words they hear, focusing on spelling.
	Sentence-Level Dictation	- The podcast host reads a sentence, and listeners write exactly what they hear. - This activity is best used when reinforcing grammar, practicing new words, and/or reviewing pronunciation.
	Free Response (Written)	- Similar to Free Response (Spoken), the podcast host asks students a question and provides them time to respond in written format. - This activity may be done along with Free Talk, in which the host speaks about a topic or plays a language game and allows time for students to respond. - Responses can be corrected by the teacher, by peers in a later class, or online by native speakers via a website (e.g., www.italki.com).
	Paraphrasing Practice	- After a lesson on paraphrasing, students read several sentences. They may also write paraphrases for each sentence. - The podcast host reads paraphrases of the sentences that students read. - Listeners match the spoken paraphrase to its original written sentence.
Grammar	Right or Wrong	- The podcast host reads two variations of the same sentence, one of which is correct and one of which is incorrect. - Students decide which version of the sentence contains the correct grammar. - They may write the correct version down or respond with "a" or "b."
	Fill in the Blank	Students fill in the blanks of spoken sentences with a grammatically correct option. (For example, when reviewing relative clauses, students must fill in the blank with the correct clause marker in the sentence "This is the restaurant ____ my parents met.")

Table 2. Ideas for creating original podcasts (continued)

Skill	Activity Name	Activity Description
	Lesson	Almost any grammar lesson taught in class may be adapted into a review via podcast.
Vocabulary	Free Talk	See Free Talk in the listening section for a method of introducing new vocabulary authentically.
	Word Sneak	- After introducing new words, the podcast host records a Free Talk episode in which target words are snuck into the response. - Students must listen for the target words and write the sentence in which they occurred, record the order in which the new words occurred, and/or fill in the blanks on a transcript. - This can be followed by Free Response (Spoken), where students sneak the new words into their own speech while responding to specific questions.
	New Words	The podcast host records an episode teaching new words. The words may be organized by root (e.g., inspect, inspector, inspection) or morphological inflection (e.g., redo, retake, reread).
Pronunciation	Prosody Practice	- The podcast host records sentences with varying inflections (e.g., "John said the boss is lazy" and "John, said the boss, is lazy"). Students write the sentences with correct punctuation. - The host records sentences with different inflections based on the key word (e.g., "We asked for five oranges" or "We asked for five oranges"). Students circle the correct option on their handout and/or respond appropriately out loud (e.g., "Not apples?" or "Not six?").
	Minimal Pairs Practice	- Students receive a handout that lists minimal pairs. - The podcast host reads one of the minimal pairs, and listeners circle and repeat the correct word. - This activity may also be completed using full sentences containing minimal pairs.
	Past Tense Verbs	- Students receive a handout that lists sentences with matching infinitive verbs. - The podcast host reads sentences with a blank for the verb, and students repeat each sentence along with the verb in the past tense.

Table 2. Ideas for creating original podcasts (continued)

2. Original Podcasts

One of the best ways to use podcasts that are personalized to your students and their needs is to create your own original podcast episodes. Combined with pre- and post-activities that vary based on class objectives and student levels, the opportunities to introduce exercises are practically limitless.

Despite the benefits, creating original podcasts is also the most time-consuming method of utilizing podcasts. With time and practice, though, many teachers may find this method simple and enjoyable for themselves as well as their students.

The first step in creating a podcast episode is to select a topic and/or learning objective. Table 2 contains a list of podcast activities,

organized by skill, that teachers can use in the virtual EFL classroom.

After selecting the lesson aim, you may choose a podcast-creation software. I use the free website Anchor (anchor.fm) to create episodes, but many other free podcast-creation platforms are available. If you choose Anchor, you will first be prompted to make an account, after which you can record episodes by selecting *New Episode*. When creating a new episode, you will have the option to *Record* new audio files, select prerecorded files from the *Library*, and add *Music* and/or *Transitions* sounds such as chimes and beeps. All the sound files added to the episode can be rearranged and edited before you click *Save episode*, insert a written episode description, and *Publish* it. The episode's audio files and written description

can be edited and republished later if the need arises. Figure 1 shows a snapshot of Anchor's interface.

Example lessons

The first step to implementing one of these activities in class is to record your episode. Then, combine your episode with pre-, during-, and post-activities to build a full lesson.

For example, a teacher who wants an interactive listening lesson may select the Listening Jigsaw activity, where the instructor records parts of a story in three separate podcast episodes. As a pre-listening activity, the teacher could introduce potentially challenging vocabulary from the episodes. Then, students listen to their assigned podcast episode on their own device. While listening, students take notes about the main events of the story segment. They can also meet with classmates who listened to the same story segment to discuss what they heard. After listening, students meet in groups of three (in which each student listened to a different segment of the story), and each person summarizes the main events of their assigned episode. The group works together to decide whose segment was the beginning, middle, and end of the story. Then, the class listens to all three episodes

in order so that students hear the full story. This activity can be extended to practice other skills. Students could rewrite the story in their own words and record a podcast episode of themselves retelling it, or they could practice pronunciation by shadowing the podcast narrator.

In another instance, the teacher who wants to focus a lesson on vocabulary might select the Word Sneak activity, in which the teacher records a conversation with target words casually snuck in. In the pre-listening stage, the teacher can introduce target words, and students practice by completing cloze exercises. Students then listen to the Word Sneak episode, writing down target words in the order they hear them. They check their answers with classmates, and the class listens to the episode once more, with students raising their hands when they hear a target word. After listening, students can hold their own Word Sneak conversations, in which they meet in small groups and try to sneak the target words into their own discussions.

3. General Audience Podcasts

A third way to use podcasts in EFL classes is to utilize podcasts that are geared towards proficient English speakers as opposed to English language learners. Although general

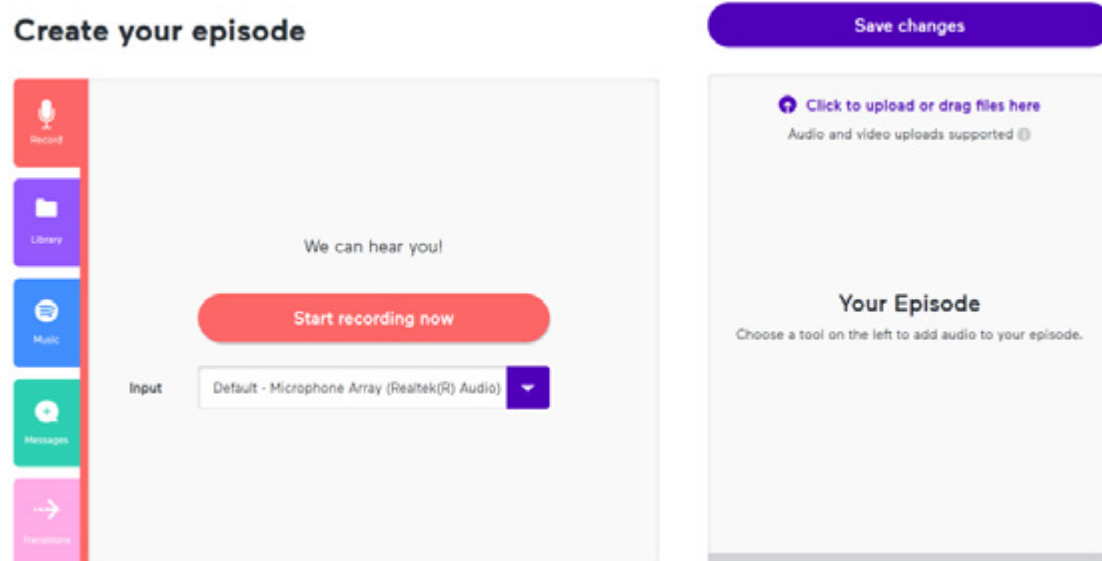


Figure 1. Podcast-creation interface on Anchor

As virtual learning continues through the end of the pandemic and beyond, students’ access to authentic English input outside the classroom continues to gain importance.

audience podcasts, as Nurmukhamedov and Sadler (2011) call them, typically include advanced vocabulary and complex sentence structures, the content can be engaging and personalized to students’ interests. Upper-intermediate and advanced students in particular may benefit from the authentic language in these podcasts. Hundreds of general audience podcasts are freely available online. Table 3 contains a few samples of recommended, award-winning shows.

Example lessons

Beyond recommending the above podcasts to students who would like more listening practice, teachers can integrate episodes into their curriculum. For example, teachers might assign students to keep a log of the podcasts

they listen to. While listening to an episode, students record in their listening log at least three new words that they hear. They record the word, its part of speech, its definition, and an example sentence using the word. These podcast-listening logs can also be incorporated in a classroom warmup, in which students converse in groups about what happened in their episode as well as what words they learned.

Further, general audience podcasts can be used for reading practice. Some podcasts provide transcripts, but those that do not can be transcribed on Otter.ai, a website that converts sound files to relatively accurate transcripts. Individuals can convert 600 minutes of audio for free on Otter.ai every month. Using a transcript, teachers can

Podcast Title (search title to access site)	Podcast Description	Episode Length and Features
<i>Cold Podcast</i>	True crime stories brought to life by sound effects and interviews	✓ 1 hour each ✓ Transcripts available on their website
<i>Comedy Bang Bang</i>	Funny interviews with comedians	✓ 1–3 hours each
<i>Crime Junkie Podcast</i>	True crime stories	✓ 45 minutes each
<i>The Monday Mama Podcast</i>	Two moms have casual conversations about relatable mom stories	✓ 20–30 minutes each
<i>Overheard at National Geographic</i>	Conversations and stories about interesting phenomena such as whale songs, aliens, and shamans	✓ 20 minutes each ✓ Transcripts available on their website
<i>Stuff You Should Know</i>	Conversations about interesting, little-known facts	✓ 20–60 minutes each
<i>This American Life</i>	Stories about people and events related to American culture and current events	✓ 60 minutes each ✓ Transcripts available on their website ✓ Episodes broken down into 10-minute clips, with summaries on their website
<i>The Truth Podcast</i>	<i>Movies for Your Ears</i> : Different fictional stories in each episode, brought to life by voice actors and sound effects	✓ 30 minutes each

Table 3. General audience podcasts

create reading lessons that are supplemented by listening. As a pre-reading activity, students discuss what they know and want to know about the episode's topic. While reading, they highlight main ideas and supporting details with different colors. After reading, students discuss what they learned from the text. They can also use their highlights to write a summary or practice paraphrasing. Finally, students read along, either silently or out loud, as they listen to the podcast.

CONCLUSION

As virtual learning continues through the end of the pandemic and beyond, students' access to authentic English input outside the classroom continues to gain importance. Utilizing podcasts in the virtual EFL classroom by employing pre-made EFL-focused episodes, creating original episodes, or using general audience podcasts allows students of various levels to practice all skills and advance on their English-learning journey.

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