

Audio Portfolios

There are a number of new exciting ways to use digital audio in and out of the ESL classroom. The opportunities for engaging in Synchronous (at the same time) and asynchronous (at different times) forms of communication have increased tremendously in recent years. Technologies such as Skype and Yahoo messenger allow teachers and students to communicate synchronously with one another from virtually any location on the planet. These have been covered in a recent installment of this column. Audacity (<http://audacity.sourceforge.net/>) has also been covered recently in this column. It allows users to easily record and save audio files that are highly compressed, thus making it easy to distribute them across email or Internet connections. Another exciting tool is Audio Portfolios. Audio Portfolios makes it possible for us to record and share audio recordings directly to an Internet site. Communication takes place in an asynchronous manner that may allow us to interact with one another in a more thoughtful manner.

What is the difference between synchronous and asynchronous communication?

There are a number of benefits to each of these forms of communication. While synchronous communication more closely resembles what happens when we engage in face to face (f2f) communication, asynchronous communication may allow our students more time to reflect upon what they are saying and refine their production. Synchronous communication requires that participants respond rapidly, and often requires that users exercise turn taking and interrupting skills in a manner that is not as natural as f2f communication. This may be partly due to the unfamiliar nature of this medium by most users and partly due to the lack of nonverbal cues that we offer one another in f2f communication. These aspects of communication are worth investigating as we engage in these kinds of activities with our students in attempt to raise awareness. Asynchronous communication allows teachers and students to save and reflect upon recordings in order to edit them to provide corrections, suggestions or other information.

How can I get it?

Audio Portfolios (available from <http://audioportfolios.com>) is a tool that provides an opportunity for students to practice speaking. Audio Portfolios was created by Dennie Hoopingarner at Michigan State University for use in the language program there. The program runs in a web browser window. Students log in to their own accounts and record themselves. When they are satisfied with their sound files, they "share" them with the instructor. Shared files are accessible to the instructor. All sound files are stored on the server, and are accessible only to the student and the instructor.

Students are not limited to audio. They can also use a webcam to record themselves and save the files with audio and video. Students and teachers can share files with one another in a single, simple to use space. While there is a free version that can be used by entering as a guest, it is much more convenient to have your own course. Courses can be purchased for 50\$ for a year. This is not a profit driven enterprise, but just a way of subsidizing the ability to share such an interesting technology with others.

All that you need to use audio portfolios is a web browser with flash plugin installed and a microphone. This setup allows you to record and listen to others' audio recordings. Having a webcam will also make it possible to record your own video segments.

Activities these technologies support

Teachers can record themselves for students to listen and respond. They can deliver brief authentic material for students to listen to. They can also ask a number of other individuals to record themselves for the benefit of their students. Invited guest “experts” can record information segments about topics of interest. Students can lead class discussions by introducing topics as well. It is also practical to have students record themselves or others using audio portfolios or similar developing technology. Whether they are involved in keeping audio journals, participating in dialogues with other students or simply responding to prompts provided by the teacher, student recordings allow for self-reflection and instructor feedback. Students can also keep ongoing audio journals for extensive reflective opportunities.