

Real Audio to Augment Real Listening in the ESL Classroom

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Introduction

One of the faster growing tools available for education and entertainment is Real Audio (RA) by Progressive Works Inc. Real Audio is a software package that allows users to listen to sounds and watch videos on or off the Internet. The RA player is free and the player/recorder is \$30.00.

After downloading this program, people can listen to radio programs like music, talk radio, and Hollywood interviews. There are also educational programs for distance education, family programs for family issues, children's programs, religious programs, etc. For a complete listing of the hundreds of sites that are listed at Progressive Works, visit their site at <http://timecast3.timecast.com/index.html>

Benefits for ESL

How can this program benefit an ESL curriculum? First of all, Real Audio is a program students can use to get information. The selection of information on the Internet is vast and varied enough to satisfy the interests of almost any student. Allowing students to choose the information they will listen to or watch is inherently motivating (Nunan, 1993). Furthermore, allowing students to pick and choose increases their confidence in being independent learners. Additionally, since the information is recorded, they can listen to or see it over and over again, an option they don't have in the real world or in broadcasted information like radio or television. Also, the materials are not limited to one or two voices. Unlike many ESL tapes, students can listen to a variety of voices and thus, improve their listening ability. Another benefit is that students have the opportunity to listen to real English, that is, English for native speakers, allowing students to enjoy the full flavor inherent in authentic English speech (Mead, 1985). Even better than having real English is real spontaneous speech (Ur, 1984). Spontaneous speech, that is spoken language that is not written out or prepared in advance, is what ESL/EFL students will hear most. Since most heard speech is spontaneous, ESL students benefit by having an abundance of impromptu speech available. Some of the radio programs on the Internet include talk shows, i.e. unprepared speech.

RA is also useful in reading classes. Some of the sites listed at RA have sound clips and transcripts allowing users to read and listen at the same time. Being able to perform both activities increases comprehension, memorization and motivation. Other sites have audio books. Books like Moby Dick and The Catcher in the Rye are dramatized in audio format. Audio books allow students to "read" a story in 30 minutes.

Although there are a variety of benefits to using RA in the ESL classroom, teachers and students should be aware of some potential problems. For instance, because the amount of vocabulary is so great, many foreign language students who possess a smaller supply may feel frustrated. Thus, the amount of appropriate materials may be limited, or the teacher may need to decide what materials the students use. Another language drawback is that some of the sound clips are lengthy. A typical audio book is about 25 minutes long. Shorter clips are easier for ESL Students to digest. The longer students practice at one sitting, the weaker his listening skills become during that sitting (Ur, 1984). Therefore, it is wise to select appropriate materials for beginning students.

Another obvious limitation is the need for a computer and Internet access. Anyone with a computer and a sound card, can use RA. This program does not require direct Internet access for it to work. However, in order to listen to the Real Audio files users must have access to them, and the files are on the Internet. If a teacher or school has even one computer that has Internet access, however, many of the necessary files can be downloaded. Many locations on the Internet allow users to download the RA files. For example, Earth and Sky, a site dedicated to educating people about astronomical and environmental issues, allows visitors to

download any information from their site. They have a daily radio program that lasts about a minute and a half. A teacher or administrator can easily download dozens of files from this site and then make those files available to the rest of the school.

Having looked at the advantages and some possible drawbacks, I would like to suggest some possible uses of RA in the ESL Classroom.

Real Audio in the Classroom

The first step in using Real Audio is to download a free version or purchase RA at <http://www.real.com/products/player/get.html>. After installing the program, begin selecting sites of interest for students. I have made a sample list for those teachers with little time to search the Internet. See Table One.

Table 1. A Sample list of Real Audio sites for ESL

Science

[Earth & Sky](#)

<http://www.earthsky.com/>

[Space Zone](#)

<http://www.spacezone.com/>

[The Discovery Channel](#)

<http://www.discovery.com/>

News

[NPR](#)

<http://www.realaudio.com/content/npr/>

[The BBC Online](#)

http://www.bbcnc.org.uk/worldservice/BBC_English/index.html

[The Osgood Files](#)

<http://www.cbsradio.com/osgood/>

Sports

[Audio Net-Sports](#)

<http://www.audionet.com/sports/>

[ESPN Sports Zone](#)

<http://espnet.sportszone.com/>

Literature

[Audio Net](#)

<http://www.audionet.com/>

[Bible](#)

<http://www.biblenews.com/>

[The Online Book Page](#)

<http://www.cs.cmu.edu/Web/books.html>

Radio

[Audio Net](#)

<http://www.audionet.com/>

[The Talk Network](#)

<http://ttn.nai.net/>

There are a variety of ways that RA can enhance an ESL classroom. If the Internet is available to the entire class, students can pick and choose what they will listen to by going to RA and picking a site among the thousands that they have listed. A teacher with limited access to the Internet will need to download files of interest and make those files available to the class. Once students and teachers choose the sound clips, they need to be incorporated into the curriculum. Here are some suggestions for incorporating RA sound clips into the ESL classroom.

Procedures

Keeping a Journal

Have students keep a journal about the sound clips that they listen to. Students write a summary of each sound clip they select. The journal need not be on paper. The journal can also be on tape or could be a RA sound clip, in which case students would record a summary of each sound clip. In addition students can mention likes and dislikes, what things they learned from the sound clips and finally record any new vocabulary they learned through the sound clip.

Guessing Definitions

If the teacher has downloaded some file, they can listen through the clip and write down any new words that they want the class to learn. Then the teacher puts the words on a practice sheet for students to guess the meaning. For example, imagine your students are listening to the April 11, 1996 episode of Earth and Sky, The topic is the Sound Barrier. The students will hear: [es960411.ram](#)

Sound is produced by vibrations in the air around our planet. The speed of sound is 760 miles an hour at sea level -- although this speed can vary a little under different conditions of altitude, temperature and wind. When an airplane tries to travel faster than sound, a wave of compressed air builds up ahead of the plane. That's why the speed of sound proved to be a formidable barrier to pilots. As they approached it, their aircrafts' controls would "lock" or freeze. The pilots themselves began speaking of a "sonic wall" or "sound barrier" that no one had crossed. Chuck Yeager was the first to break the sound barrier -- to travel faster than sound -- in the year 1947. You may have heard a sonic boom from a plane traveling faster than sound.

A possible question might be

- What is a sonic boom?
 1. Travelling faster than sound
 2. the sound from a plane that travels faster than sound
 3. a barrier a wall of compressed air

This episode uses the word *sonic boom*, but does not directly define it. Therefore students can guess the meaning of the word by listening to the context. Such an exercise will allow students to practice guessing the meaning through context.

Ticking off Items

For those interested in practicing with listening for specific information, have the students tick off items from a list. While the students are listening to a clip they tick off all the objects mentioned from a checklist of possible items. For example, if your students are listening to the Sound Barrier, a possible list might be:

- The speed of sound changes under conditions of
 - altitude
 - location on the earth
 - temperature
 - moon
 - wind

Making / Identifying Pictures and Maps

If you are a good artist, you may want to draw some comic strips which are in the wrong order. When the students listen to the clip, they number the pictures in the correct order. For example in Earth & Sky's February 18, 1997 episode entitled, "Journey into a Black Hole" the students will listen to the following: [es970218.ram](#)

At first, you wouldn't feel anything strange (1). You wouldn't notice a physical change in your surroundings -- unless you tried to go back the way you came. Then no amount of energy would be able to push you back out of the black hole. An object's gravity gets stronger as you get closer to it. If you were falling into a black hole, the gravitational pull on your feet would be much greater than that on your head (2) -- assuming you were falling feet first! You'd be stretched into an indefinite length (3) as you got closer to the hole. The hole's gravity would also compress your body (4) -- it'd squeeze your two shoulders together, for example -- and ultimately stretch and squeeze the very atoms that make up your body (5)! The result -- the total destruction of your body on its journey into a black hole.
(Block, 1996)

In this example make a five part comic strip and have the students put them in proper order. Artistically challenged teachers might want to have the students make pictures from the account that they are listening to.

Cloze

As was mentioned earlier, some sites on the Internet, like Earth and Sky, transcribe their program allowing users to read and listen to the program at the same time. The teacher can take the transcripts and convert them to close exercises for practice or for a test. A close generation program is available for download at Tim John's Call Center. <http://sun1.bham.ac.uk/johnstf/timcall.htm>, or if you use Microsoft Word, check out the macro I made to create computerized close exercises from inside Word. Download this macro at <http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Oracle/4993/resource.html>

True or False

In order to create true false questions, teachers need to listen to a sound clip and generate true/false questions which students then answer as they listen to the clip in class or during lab time. For example, in a sound clip at Car Talk episode entitled, "Foreign Embassy Car Problem", the students will listen to the following:

- Caller: Well the police won't do anything about the security system in this car because it is an embassy car in the Swedish embassy parking lot. But that sound from the security system keeps the whole neighborhood awake all night.
- Tom: Ok. Here's what you need to do. Do you have a tuxedo?
- Caller: No.
- Tom: Rent one.
- Ray: Do you have blond hair?
- Caller: Yes.
- Ray: Good! (laugh)
- Tom: Ok sometime late in the evening, put on your tuxedo, stand near the car and call AAA. Tell them you want them to tow the car to the Mercedes car dealer in Maryland.

(CarTalk, 1997)

As the students listens to this episode, they can answer true false questions about what they are listening to. Possible true or false questions might be:

- The police helped the caller and stopped the sound in the car.
- The police won't help because the car is a German Car.
- The caller has a tuxedo.
- The caller has blond hair.

Answering Questions

Creating content questions requires that the teacher listen to a clip and generate questions for that clip. For example, Car Talk has a clips from their weekly radio program on the Internet. Car Talk does not always have transcripts. So I simply listen to a clip and write some questions like:

- Who called?
- What problem did they have?
- What advice did the mechanics give?

The students then listen to the clips to get the answers. This type of activity will help students practice with getting the gist, and with listening for specific content.

Discussion

More advanced students would enjoy doing research about a particular topic and then sharing their findings with the rest of the class. For example, Give the students the topic of Martin Luther King Jr. and some questions to answer. At AudioNet there is an audio book on the life of Martin Luther King Jr. Students can listen to this book, collect information about him. Other students could go the National Public Radio RA archives and listen to audio clips of Dr. King there. Then all of the students can share their findings and discuss some of the issues surrounding his life.

Precautions

There are some things to remember for people who develop and implement these materials. First of all, it is important to select materials appropriate to the learners. Language students can quickly become fatigued listening to exercises that are beyond their abilities (Ur,1984). Thus, in order to limit frustration and increase motivation, use sound clips that are within the students grasp.

It is also important to provide a purpose for the listening activity. Having a purpose provides students with a reason to actively listen. By giving students a task in the listening activity, teachers can also measure how well the students understood the sound clip. Finally, task oriented listening activities contribute to motivation. Fun activities or success oriented activities where students win a game because they completed a task are some possible techniques for increasing motivation in a listening activity. Students without a purpose for listening will exhibit less motivation for succeeding.

Conclusion

Real Audio is a new technology that is not being used in the ESL classroom currently, but has the possibility to greatly enhance language learning. Some benefits students can enjoy include:

- Listening to information that interests them.
- Listening to sound clips over and over again.
- Listening to a variety of voices which strengthens listening ability.
- Being encouraged to become more independent learners.
- Listening to spontaneous speech.
- Reading and listening at the same time.

Some benefits teachers/administrators can enjoy include:

- Minimal cost if a computer and the Internet are accessible.
- Freedom to work with those students who need individual assistance while allowing more independent learners proceed at their own pace.
- Increased student motivation.
- Increased learner independence.
- The ability to retrieve and use thousands of sound clips, not just the ones in the school tape library.
- The ability to integrate Real Audio with other HTML based materials

RA sound clips are intrinsically motivating as the materials themselves are of interest to the students. The range of materials is

enormous and the range is growing everyday. If you have a little time to search and develop some materials, RA sound clips provide a useful and interesting way of sharpening students listening skills.

If you are interested in more sites for ESL students, drop by at realaudio.com or you can stop by my home page at <http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Oracle/4993/raudio.htm>.

If you are interested in getting involved in a research with Real Audio in ESL, please drop me a line at [fltuzi \[at\] geocities.com](mailto:fltuzi@geocities.com)

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