

The Language Teacher

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The Japan Association for Language Teaching

Volume 45, Number 1 • January / February 2021

ISSN 0289-7938 • ¥1,900 • TLT uses recycled paper



Paul Raine

In this column, we discuss the latest developments in ed-tech, as well as tried and tested apps and platforms, and the integration between teaching and technology. We invite readers to submit articles on their areas of interest. Please contact the editor before submitting.

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Paul Raine has been a Japan-based teacher and coder since 2006. He has developed the web-based language teaching and learning platform *TeacherTools.Digital*, and many other web-based tools.

Producing Educational Podcasts with Anchor

Richard Thomas Ingham

The British Council, Japan

Podcasts and podcasting have experienced huge growth in recent years, with an estimated 800,000 active podcasts and over 54 million podcast episodes available worldwide (Adgate, 2019). A recent report on podcasts in Japan (St. Michel, 2019) noted a proliferation of English language learning related podcasts, indicating considerable demand for this kind of podcast.

Regarding the beneficial effects of podcasts in foreign language education, Hasan and Tan (2012) noted improved listening skills as a result of listening to podcasts and suggested their future integration into ESL curricula to facilitate learning. Within Japan, a recent study by Lauer et al. (2016) found that students using podcasts were able to achieve considerable improvements in their listening scores in TOEIC-style tests.

However, while this research highlights the potential benefits of podcasts for language learning, the image persists that the creation and distribution of voice content is problematic. I have found that this is not the case, and learner-focused podcasts can be quickly and easily published using a minimum amount of equipment. I have used the software described in this article to produce the weekly NUFs Collabo English Podcast for the students at the university department where I am currently employed (see <https://anchor.fm/richard-nufs> to access this podcast).

Producing your own podcasts could enable you to tailor listening content to your learners' needs, thereby increasing their motivation. Alternatively, you may decide to let learners participate actively and increase their engagement by encouraging them to produce podcasts of their own.

Anchor

Anchor is one of several podcast-making apps currently available, and can be regarded as a kind of "one-stop shop" for podcasting. While many podcasting platforms charge to host and distribute podcasts, Anchor is free, with no hosting fees, trial periods, or paywalls, representing a real boon for cash-strapped educators. It enables the user to record, edit, and host a podcast, either via the free smartphone app, or by using the website Anchor.fm. I have found that it is best to download both, as each has its own specific strengths and weaknesses.

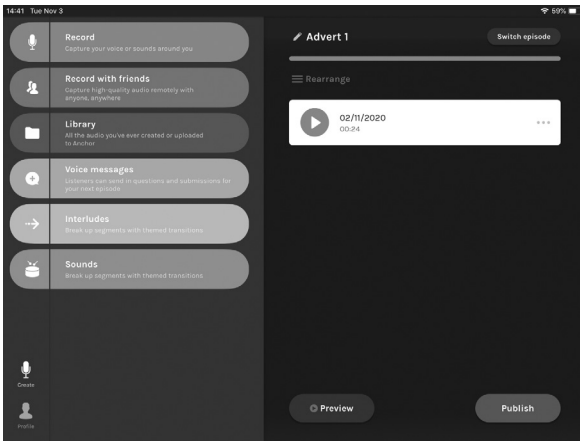
Everything that is needed for each part of the podcasting process is provided, and users can pick and choose which elements to use. For example, a podcast show can be created entirely from scratch within Anchor's software, or alternatively, previously created audio files can be easily uploaded and distributed using the web application.

Recording

After downloading the app and signing into the website, the first stage is to record the segments of your podcast. It is possible to record these from a phone, tablet, or computer, giving users a great deal of flexibility. For example, on the spot recording using the built-in microphone on a tablet is simple, and this is the method I have used to record most of my podcasts. The image below shows the main interface page encountered when starting up the app.

It is also possible to record remotely via the app—useful during these socially-distanced times—by using the "Record with Friends" feature. This can be used to connect to 10 people from anywhere in the world through the application. I have successfully used this feature to record interviews with students and co-workers when face-to-face meetings were not possible.

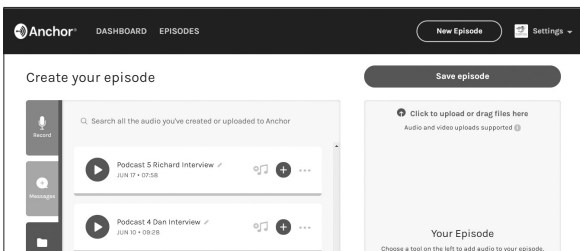
It is also feasible for students to record their own segments and provide you with the sound files. These can be easily added into the podcast using the episode builder discussed below.



Whilst condenser microphones and audio interfaces will no doubt improve the audio quality of your podcast, sophisticated recording equipment is by no means necessary. I have achieved a perfectly acceptable sound quality for my own educational podcast by using the in-built microphones on my tablet and computer.

Episode Building

Once you have recorded a sound file or files, you can then start to build the podcast. This can be done either via the app, or via the website, and podcast segments just need to be dragged and dropped to where you want them to appear in the podcast. The episode creation screen from the website is shown in the image below. Within the app, it is possible to add some simple sound effects and interludes to break up the segments and make the podcast sound a little more professional. However, it should be noted that sophisticated editing of the audio content is not possible within the Anchor software. As your podcasting skills develop, however, you may want to explore the possibilities of other audio editing software such as Audacity or GarageBand.



Distribution and Sharing

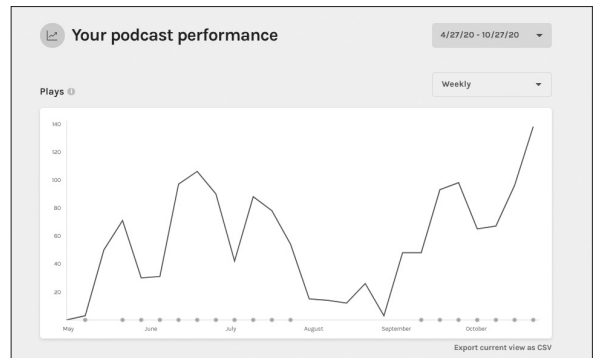
Podcasts are automatically available for people to hear on the Anchor website as soon as you upload

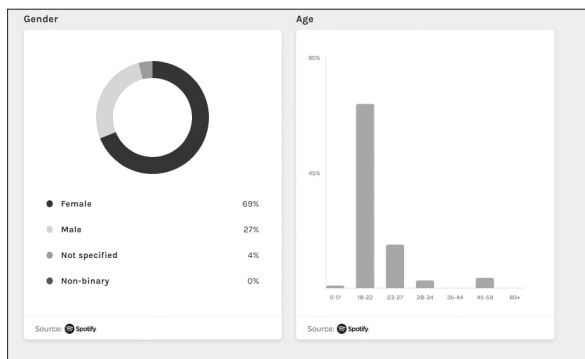
them. However, in order to make them more accessible to your learners, you will probably want to make them available on Apple Podcasts (iTunes) and Spotify. With Anchor, if you choose to distribute your podcast everywhere, it will be automatically submitted to other podcast platforms, with a notification being sent to the podcast creator when it becomes available on a new platform. The software provider maintains that the process usually takes between 24-48 hours, although it took over 10 days for my initial podcast to appear on Apple Podcasts. After the initial set-up, future episodes are automatically distributed to all the platforms. In my experience, new podcast episodes are available within a few hours of their upload to Anchor.

All Anchor podcast members are provided with a custom Anchor URL (e.g. <https://anchor.fm/richard-nufs>). When shared, this link takes listeners directly to your podcast—either in the Anchor mobile app if they have installed it, or the Anchor web profile. This URL can be used to embed the podcast into your blog or website, so that learners do not need to leave the website to listen to the podcast.

Analytics

The Anchor online site provides several simple analytical tools, enabling analysis of the podcast’s performance. Details on the total number of plays, estimated audience size, and episode popularity are easy to obtain. Information relating to the listeners—their geographical location, age, gender and the devices that they listen on—is also readily available. For example, the screenshots below from my Anchor site provide me with information about the weekly number of listeners, it also breaks up these listeners by gender and age group. Perhaps more interestingly, it is possible to drill down into each episode to check the retention rate of your learners—are they listening to the whole podcast, or switching off after a few minutes? These analytical features can provide educators with valuable feedback, enabling them to tailor their podcasts to their learners’ needs.





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Conclusion

In all, the production and distribution of podcasts through the Anchor software is free, straightforward, and quick to achieve. The provision of simple analytical tools enables users to check their podcasts' performance and make necessary changes to increase learner engagement. While not the most sophisticated podcasting software available on the market, Anchor is not only free, but also provides educators with a great way to examine the potential benefits of podcasts for their learners.

[JALT PRAXIS] BOOK REVIEWS



Robert Taferner & Stephen Case

If you are interested in writing a book review, please consult the list of materials available for review in the Recently Received column, or consider suggesting an alternative book that would be helpful to our membership.

Email: reviews@jalt-publications.org

Web: <https://jalt-publications.org/tlt/departments/book-reviews>

This month's column features Thomas Entwistle's review of *Usborne English Readers* series and Susan Brennan's evaluation of *CBS NewsBreak 4*.

Usborne English Readers

[London, UK: Usborne Publishing, 2017. Starter level p. 24. Level 1 p. 32. Level 2 p. 40. Level 3 p. 48. Individual books ¥970. ISBN: 9781474927826.]

Reviewed by Thomas Entwistle, *The British Council, Japan*

There are levels of the Usborne English Reader series available: Starter (six titles, low A1, 300 headwords), level 1 (twelve titles, A1, 500 head-

words), Level 2 (twelve titles, A2, 800 headwords), and level 3 (eleven titles, B1, 1,200 headwords). All of the titles are adaptations of mythology (*King Midus, Robin Hood*), classic stories (*Romeo and Juliet, Alice in Wonderland*), and fairy tales (*Cinderella, Snow White*). Each reader is fully illustrated and comes with activity pages, a word list with concise definitions, downloadable grammar resources (above starter level), and a QR code link to an online audiobook version in both American and British English.

It may be argued by some in higher education that graded readers do not have a place in academic courses and in academic contexts. However, as Day et al. (2011, p. 10) stated, extensive reading (ER) "is an approach to teaching reading whose goal is to get students reading in the English language and enjoy it." It was beliefs like this that piqued my interest in ER and why I decided to critique the Usborne English Reader series.