

Using a Digital Voice Recorder with Learners

Practical tips from Linda Jackson – Languages Tutor, Devon ACL, Feb 08

*This document is the result of practical experience in using a digital voice recorder with adult learners on French Language courses. The particular voice recorder used was an **Olympus WS200s** digital recorder – but the tips apply more generally as well. The document was produced by Linda Jackson with occasional extra text from Ralph Cullimore (e-Learning Co-ordinator, Devon ACL) indicated by the initials **RC**.*

A. Advantages over other methods of recording

This recorder is very handy indeed because:

1. It plugs directly into a USB socket on the computer – no need for software, so it can be accessed on pretty much any computer anywhere without the need for a cable
2. It switches itself off after a certain amount of inactive time, so you don't suddenly find you've run out of battery when you come to record.
3. It produces "WMA" format files which are standard audio files that will play on any computer with a Windows operating system (*and there are free conversion programs available to download so the files will play on Apple computers and others – RC*). You can get programs for editing this type of file, so you can cut out bits later on - see also item 7 in section C below.
4. Because the files are standard, you can send them by email to students who then only have to open an attachment and the file starts playing. They don't have to be very computer-savvy!
5. Also because the files are standard you can group them together and burn them onto a CD. This is useful for students without internet access and also so that the files can be listened to in the car or wherever. It would be useful to provide students with written instructions about how to do this themselves, so that you don't spend too much time explaining it (in my dreams!)
Note that to play the WMA files on older CD players you first need to convert them to standard audio CD format using the free Windows Media Player software – RC

B. Recording and inputting

1. Even without a microphone you can put the recorder on a table and it will pick up a conversation between several people fairly well. (*But it's best to rest it on something soft to avoid picking up vibrations from the table – RC*)
2. I had to play around with the settings. I've found one which is fairly all purpose for me now which is **HQ** recording format and "**lo**" microphone sensitivity. (*See Ralph's 7 page manual for how to change these settings, and lots more - RC*)
3. The above setting works well for everything except where there is a lot of background noise. Recording in a restaurant was no good at all. The background noise was very prominent with this setting.
4. You can plug any small & inexpensive computer microphone into the socket on the recorder and get a fantastically clear recording using the same settings.
5. You can get an inexpensive connector which links the voice recorder with any cassette player (assuming the cassette player has a headphone socket) so if you

have got some old material on tape you can transfer it onto the recorder (and then, of course, onto the computer)

6. You can place your recorder near your computer and record from language websites. The sound is better without the microphone for this.
7. You can pause a recording by pressing the record button again while recording. To restart you just press the same record button a further time. Very useful, and fairly straightforward, when you are busy with other concerns!
8. The tiny speaker on the recorder itself is only good for checking roughly what you have got in a file, but you can plug in any computer-type speakers so you can play things in class. If you have been loaned a small pair of speakers with the voice recorder you may find these are not loud enough for easy whole-class listening. Using a mains extension lead will let you place the speakers directly on the table right next to the students which may help.
9. The control system on the recorder is quite efficient; to pause a recording whilst playing back, press the STOP button - then press PLAY to continue. Also, like a CD player, if you press REW (rewind) it will instantly go back to the beginning of the file. *You can also put in 'index marks' by pressing the INDEX button at the appropriate place – then press the REW button to go back to that index so allowing you to repeatedly play one part of a recording - RC*

C. Uses

I know that the recorder can be used for exam related recordings. I haven't had occasion to do that yet, but I use it for practically everything else I can think of.

In particular I make **recordings of myself** which I email to **students as homework** - eventually these will all be available on 'my' course on the DACL pilot Moodle website. I just do these off the cuff, so they're not perfect. As a rule I do them once, perhaps with a few notes, pausing the recorder if I can't think what to say next. The students are happy with this and it means **they get something relating to that particular week's class**, which they wouldn't if I had to put in the extra time to get things perfect! I have got into a rhythm of sending them 2 or perhaps 3 files of 3-4 minutes each, each week.

This is the sort of thing I use the recorder for:

1. Recording a **dialogue** between myself and any convenient male French speaker for listening practice - they don't have to be male but it helps tell the voices apart.
2. Recording a practice **role play** with gaps. For instance I might be the waiter and greet the "customer" in French then tell the student in English what to say back (in a stage whisper to make clear that this is an instruction, rather than a word for word translation)

For instance, I might say "say you'd like a beer". Obviously I don't want them to actually say "you'd like a beer" but "I'd like a beer". I then give a possible correct way of saying this and (if I remember) leave them a space to repeat it

3. Recording **more structured practice**, for instance for helping them to remember vocabulary items, particular expressions or structures. This might be something like "say you went to Tesco yesterday" or "ask if it went well" with a gap for them to speak and a sample of a possible response. I feel this helps the slower ones as it means they can go over what we did in class at a **more personal speed** as many times as they need.

4. Recording myself **explaining how to say something** or some item of **grammar** - depending on the level this might be in French or English. I might for instance go over *du, de la* and *des* and when you use these, or go over quantity expressions where you use *de*. As above, this helps slower learners, or possibly I might never have given the "explanation" in class, so I can refer students who feel they want to have it, to the recording.
5. Recording a native speaker talking about something for a **prepared listening practice**. The digital recorder is great for this because it is so reliable and so unobtrusive and can be used without a microphone in any quiet place. This is something I would not email to students until I had gone over it with them in class. I would block access to it on Moodle as well, until after they had done it - see section E below for my plans about how to use this type of recording.
6. Taking **recordings off the internet**. I just set my microphone up near the computer speakers and record. The result isn't bad, and quite useful for using some of the excellent open access material that is available online. (*But you need to check for copyright limitations – usually shown somewhere obvious on the website – RC*)
7. Finally - and this is work in progress - **recording parts of a class**. This will be a much more useful exercise once I've got to grips with a WMA editing program, as there are silences in classes which you don't notice at the time but which are deadly boring on tape. You can set the recorder to turn off when it "hears" silence, but I haven't got round to this! (*I plan to produce a helpsheet about editing – RC*)

I did a useful recording, for instance, one day when I knew I would be explaining (in French) about how to form the *passé composé* past tense. I made a point of speaking alongside anything I wrote on the board "for the benefit of the tape". It was actually quite good, and a couple of students asked questions which added to the interest. I felt that this particular group would get something out of listening to their own class and have the grammatical explanation at the same time

D. File sizes & File names

Sizes. The voice files can be quite big, which is the only drawback I have come up with.

The first time I tried to email recordings to students my whole email system groaned and sighed and generated all sorts of complications. I now try to keep recordings in separate files of between 3 and 4 minutes or so. You can go larger, but once you start getting close to 10 minutes you are getting onto very shaky ground if email is involved.

One way to reduce size is to use the 'Standard' (SP) recording setting which produces files about half the size of the HQ ones – though the quality is not quite so good. Alternatively, putting the files on the Moodle website gets round the size problems entirely – RC

Names. When you make a recording it is automatically given a name which is just a series of numbers. Once you have plugged the recorder into the computer, a useful tip is to rename all the files (using Windows Explorer or My Computer) with something that both you and the students can recognise. Mine have names like "*il y en a*", "*Comment ca se dit?*" "*je suis allée à Tesco*" etc.

On the recorder itself the names won't show up (the files are all numbers) but when you plug the recorder into the computer the names will show up in windows explorer and will show up on email or Moodle.

E. Prepared listening items

My approach with these is to work gradually through them, pre-teaching any difficult items. I do this bit by bit, so we would discuss new things then listen to the bit containing them, discuss problems, play it again and so on till they were confident about that section.

I would then move on to the other sections in the same way, but each time I replay from the beginning, so by the end they have heard some parts of it 20 or 30 times.

At no time do they get a transcript, and I would not put a transcript on the Moodle website either, just a worksheet incorporating the pre-teaching elements.

For instance, I might say “Listen out for the French expression for Market Research”. This gives them the information they need (what the French expression means) but makes them engage in a listening exercise to match it up to the French.