

Name of product: ESLPod.com

Name of reviewer: Ryan T. Miller

PRODUCT AT A GLANCE

Product Type:	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Podcast series: Listening practice with a focus on vocabulary development and cultural knowledge (US)Supplementary Learning Guide for each podcast provides a written transcript of the podcast as well as glossary of vocabulary items in the podcast, comprehension questions, and cultural notes
Language(s):	ESL/EFL
Level	High beginner to intermediate; Adult learners
Activities	Listening comprehension, vocabulary learning,
Media Format:	WWW (http://www.eslpod.com)
Hard Disk Space	Approximately 10MB for each podcast audio file; approximately 200KB for each Learning Guide
Sound	To listen on a computer, a sound card is required; Podcasts can also be listened to on a digital audio player (e.g. iPod)
Supplementary Software	<i>Required:</i> WWW browser <i>Optional:</i> Software that can play mp3 audio files, PDF viewer, RSS feed aggregator
Printed Documentation (Online)	A student Learning Guide is available for every podcast; no documentation for teachers
Price	Podcast audio files are free Learning Guides are available at cost. Prices are as follows: <ul style="list-style-type: none">Single Learning Guide: \$1.99Basic subscription (all Learning Guides published after subscription; 2-week window to download each Learning Guide): \$10/moPremium subscription (all new and previous Learning Guides; unlimited time window to download Learning Guides: \$60 for the first month, \$10/mo thereafterClass subscriptions are available for classes of 10 or more students, with subscription lengths ranging from 6 to 9 months, and prices ranging from \$35 to \$75 per student, depending on subscription length and number of students

1. GENERAL DESCRIPTION

Background Information

ESLPod is an online service that provides listening materials that can be used by either individual students or by instructors as in-class or at-home listening practice. The audio files (MP3 format) and Learning Guides (PDF format) are available via the ESLPod.com web site or via RSS feed for automatic downloading to the user's computer or digital audio player. ESLPod has been publishing podcasts since July, 2005.

According to the ESLPod.com web site, ESLPod is run by Dr. Lucy Tse and Dr. Jeff McQuillan, who both received their Ph.D. in applied linguistics and education from the University of Southern California, and who both have served as professors of applied linguistics and education at a number of universities on the west coast. Currently, both authors are employed by the Center for Educational Development, Inc., the primary sponsor of ESLPod. According to the ESLPod.com web site, Tse writes the scripts, whereas McQuillan serves as 'host' on the podcast.

The web site of ESLPod claims that ESLPod uses a "very different approach than other courses or websites," in that they "provide English at a slower speed and use everyday phrases and expressions." The authors emphasize that many students often use materials that are too difficult for them, resulting in a comprehension rate of less than 50% ("which means they are wasting half of their time!") On ESLPod, the authors stress that input must be comprehensible by the student, and due to this orientation, the dialogues and explanations are presented at a rate that is slower-than-native. This orientation toward comprehensible input is not surprising, as both authors were students of Dr. Stephen Krashen, and both authors have published with Dr. Krashen

(e.g., Krashen & McQuillan, 1996; Krashen, Tse, & McQuillan, 1998). Thus, Krashen's Input Hypothesis (1980) seems to play a major role in the pedagogical stance of the authors. This focus is described in more detail later.

Summary of Features

ESLPod publishes approximately 3 new podcasts per week, with updates occurring on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. Each new podcast consists of an audio recording of approximately 15 to 20 minutes in length, with an accompanying Learner Guide. Each audio recording contains a fictional story which consists of a dialogue between McQuillan and another person, lasting approximately 1 minute, and an additional 20 seconds of monologue by the main character before and after the dialogue. The majority of the remainder of the podcast is dedicated to explanation of the topics and vocabulary used in the dialogue and monologue. The podcast finishes with a "native speed" version of the story that is identical in content to the initial presentation, with the only difference being the speech rate. Currently, there are 518 'episodes' available, divided into 9 thematic categories: business, daily life, dining, entertainment, health/medicine, relationships, shopping, transportation, and travel, with most podcasts filed under multiple categories.

In addition, there are also currently 209 "English Café" podcasts available on the site, which are based around 3-4 specific non-fiction topics that the host (McQuillan) talks about by himself, similar to a radio talk show. Although these, too, are presented at a slower-than-native rate, the rate is faster than that of the podcasts based around fictional stories.

The Learning Guide that accompanies each podcast contains a transcript of the monologue, dialogue, and all explanations given by the host of the podcast. In addition, the Learning Guide contains a glossary section that lists key vocabulary items from the story (approximately 15-20 words or phrases per episode) and includes simple definitions of the words or phrases and examples of the vocabulary items used in sentential context (sentences which are different from the context in the story). The Learning Guide also contains short, multiple-choice comprehension questions and answers (approximately 2 per episode), a “What else does it mean?” section that gives secondary meanings or other word forms of vocabulary items (approximately 2 per episode). There is also a “Culture Note” section of approximately 2 paragraphs that contains a description of a specific cultural element that appears in the story. These descriptions can be helpful for learners to understand the story or the host’s descriptions by providing extended background information.

2. EVALUATION

Technological Features

The ESLPod.com web site itself can be used independent of computer operating system, and only requires a web browser. If sound files (mp3) are downloaded, software that can play MP3 files is required. Alternatively, audio files can be listened to online through a web browser without downloading the files via the Adobe Flash plug-in. The site works using the latest versions of Firefox (3.5.3), Internet Explorer (8.0.6), Chrome (3.0), and Safari (4.0.3), and, most likely, most older versions of these and other browsers, provided that they are capable of

interpreting JavaScript, CSS, and tables. The site complies with the HTML 4.0.1-Transitional standard.

The site also makes use of RSS feeds for automatic delivery of new podcasts to subscribers' computers or digital audio players. Subscriptions are available via iTunes, Yahoo! Podcasts, and Google Feedburner. This automatic delivery method combined with regular updates and the ability to play the files on either portable or static devices makes ESLPod fit the definition of podcasting that Rosell-Aguilar (2009) says "opens up new possibilities for [podcasting's] use as a language-learning tool" (p. 14).

The site itself is fairly easy to navigate, although there is no description on the main page of what is available at the site. The main page is divided into 3 sections, ESL Podcast Blog, Latest Podcasts, and ESL Podcast Store, however no descriptions are present to inform new users what the function of each section is.

Activities

When students first enter the ESLPod.com web site, they see three sections, although without a greeting text that explains what the site is, and where to find information. First, there is an ESLPod Blog section which contains occasional (about once per week) posts written by the authors of the site (Tse or McQuillan) about various topics ranging from popular music and media, to language games, to happy birthday messages. Users of the site can post replies to these blog posts; there are typically about 20 to 30 replies to each post.

Beneath the blog section on the main page is the podcast section, the main section of the site.

The 10 newest podcasts are shown on the main page, and older podcasts are available by clicking on “view more”.

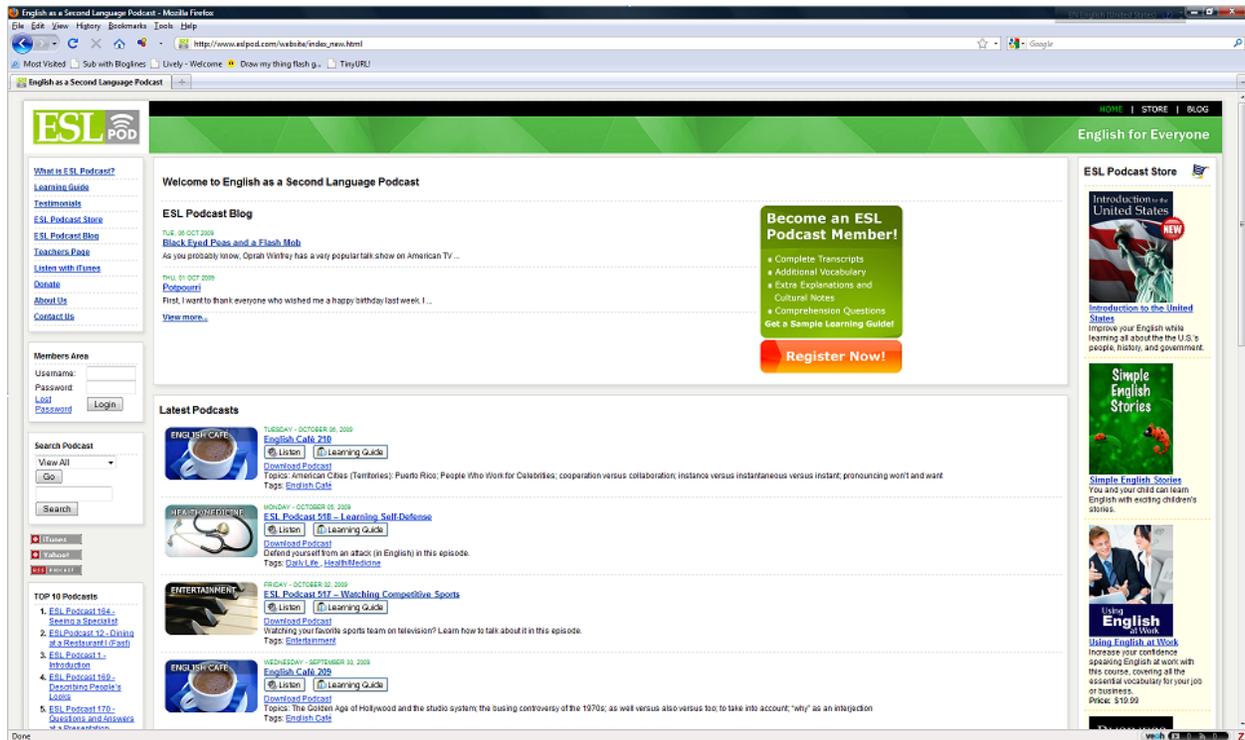


Figure 1. The main page of ESLPod.com

Students can click on “listen” to immediately listen to the podcast online via a Flash-based audio player. Students who have a paid subscription to the site can also access the Learning Guide for each podcast by clicking on the “Learning Guide” button next to each podcast. By clicking on the title of the podcast, learners can view the script of the dialogue in the podcast with new words bolded for free, but cannot view the transcript of the explanations (contained in the Learning Guide) without a paid subscription. Students who are interested in a specific topic can

click on the tag next to a podcast to find other podcasts on the site within the same theme, or users can use the search box on the left side of the page.

The screenshot displays the ESL Podcast website interface. At the top left is the 'ESL POD' logo. Below it is a navigation menu with links: 'What is ESL Podcast?', 'Learning Guide', 'Testimonials', 'ESL Podcast Store', 'ESL Podcast Blog', 'Teachers Page', 'Listen with iTunes', 'Donate', 'About Us', and 'Contact Us'. To the right of the menu is a 'Members Area' with fields for 'Username:' and 'Password:', a 'Login' button, and links for 'Lost Password'. Below the members area is a 'Search Podcast' section with a 'View All' dropdown, a 'Go' button, and a search input field. At the bottom left are social media icons for iTunes, Yahoo!, and RSS. The main content area features a green header with the date 'FRIDAY - SEPTEMBER 18, 2009' and the title 'ESL Podcast 513 – Snooping and Eavesdropping'. It includes 'Listen' and 'Learning Guide' buttons, a 'Download Podcast' link, and a 'Tags: Relationships' section. The audio index lists 'Stow dialogue: 1:31', 'Explanations: 2:58', and 'Fast dialogue: 12:38'. The transcript shows a dialogue between Enrique and Stella, with key phrases like 'talked me into', 'rifle through', 'snooping', 'suspicious', 'Confront him', 'height of stupidity', 'holed up', 'sit tight', 'confined spaces', 'make a break for it', 'suffocate', 'kvetching', 'eavesdrop', 'lost your mind', and 'No guts, no glory!'. A 'Home' button is located below the transcript. At the bottom, there are copyright notices and a disclaimer: 'The text above is for the first part of each podcast. All scripts are copyrighted by the Center for Educational Development and are for personal use only, not to be re-distributed or sold. Teachers may copy them for their students for use in class, and anyone can link to this page. Posting the script or the podcast file (MP3) on another website is not permitted.'

Figure 2. Sample free explanation of a specific podcast, available without a subscription.

When students listen to the podcast, they first hear the story (monologue and dialogue), followed by explanation of key vocabulary and topics introduced in the story. Although the story itself is only between 1 and 2 minutes, the explanation tends to be about 15 minutes long. The explanation also contains a number of cultural points.

The Learning Guide that is available for each podcast is a PDF document that is 8-10 pages in length, and contains a list of vocabulary items (both single words and phrases) with short definitions and example sentences, cultural notes, and a transcript of the entire podcast.

CULTURE NOTE

Most Americans have private health insurance; that is, they or their employers pay for a private company to take care of their doctor and hospital expenses. Unlike many other countries, the United States does not have a national, free health system. The national or “federal” government does pay for the medical care of certain people who are very poor or who are old, but there are many people in the U.S. with no health insurance at all. Most people are part of a “group health” plan called a Health Maintenance Organization, or HMO. These HMOs are private companies that organize and administer clinics and hospitals for their members. You become a member of an HMO by paying a certain amount of money, or by having your company pay for you.

When you first get sick, you usually have to see a GP before being able to talk to a medical specialist. The GP will examine you and, if he or she thinks you need to see someone who is an expert, you will get a “referral” – permission to talk to another doctor who specializes in the problem you have. If you don’t agree with your doctor, you can also get a second opinion, usually without having to pay any extra money.

Figure 3. Sample Culture Note from a Learning Guide.



English as a Second Language Podcast
www.eslpod.com

ESL Podcast 164 – Seeing a Specialist

GLOSSARY

nagging pain – a pain that continues to hurt and that won’t go away

* I can’t sleep at night because of the nagging pain in my back.

routine tests – regular tests, not special ones

* The doctor ordered some routine tests for my daughter.

Figure 4. Sample glossary items from a Learning Guide

Teacher Fit

One of the major strengths of ESLPod is its incorporation of Krashen’s Input Hypothesis (1980).

Podcasting appeals to a young audience, and is “motivating and attractive” (Rosell-Aguilar, 2009,

p. 18). This facet corresponds to Krashen's notion of an affective filter (Dulay, Burt, & Krashen, 1982), which allows language acquisition to occur more readily when learners are more accepting of the input. In addition, comprehensibility of input is emphasized, with focus mostly on new vocabulary that is presented within a linguistically and conceptually simple narrative frame. This corresponds to Krashen's ideas of both comprehensible input and $i+1$. Also in keeping with the tenets of the Input Hypothesis, there is no emphasis on or chance for learner output or interaction in the course of the podcast, both of which are recognized as crucial parts of SLA (Gass & Varonis, 1994; Swain, 2000). Although this lack of output or interaction may be seen as a drawback by many modern SLA theorists and pedagogues, podcasting as a format is fundamentally only able to provide input. Thus, the Input Hypothesis fits well with the current capabilities of the podcasting format, and this theory is exploited well by ESLPod.

Another benefit of ESLPod is its incorporation of multiple speech rates of the monologues and dialogues. Appropriate speech rate has long been a topic of debate in the literature on listening comprehension. Popular belief of L2 listening is that slower speech rate facilitates listening comprehension (Rost, 2005), and some studies (e.g. Zhao, 1997) have shown that, when given control, L2 learners prefer slower speech, leading to increased comprehension. However, this result is not often shown in the literature, and a much larger body of research has shown that faster speech rates can lead to higher comprehension (Gallien, 2001; Jensen & Vinther, 2003, as cited in Vandergrift, 2007), and that L2 learners generally prefer more authentic rates of speech because such practice can help L2 learners to understand similar texts in the future (Vandergrift, 2007). While ESLPod does provide a slower-than-native version of the story at the beginning of the podcast (in an effort to make more of the text comprehensible), a "native-speed" version is

also included at the end, after students have been introduced to new vocabulary included in the story.

A drawback of the ESLPod podcast is its lack of visual input to learners. While this is at the same time a criticism of much of the podcasting materials in existence, modern digital audio players and computers are capable of displaying both audio and video formats. Although the cost, in terms of both time and money, of producing video is potentially exponentially greater than that of producing audio alone, research has shown that gestures and facial cues are important sources of information for L2 learners (Sueyoshi & Hardison, 2005). It may be beneficial for future versions of ESLPod to take this into consideration, and incorporate a video version of ESLPod with actors acting out the stories, and with the face of the host of the podcast visible. Such visual elements could help learners by showing facial expressions, gestures, lip movements, and other non-verbal cues. This incorporation of visual content would enhance the effectiveness of ESLPod, especially among L2 learners who are dominantly visual learners.

Another drawback of ESLPod is its almost entire focus on vocabulary development. While vocabulary development is important, there is very little explicit attention paid to how to use those vocabulary items within the syntax of a sentence. In addition, the number of new vocabulary items (those explained in detail later in the podcast), may be too high at roughly 15-20% of the total words in the story (of the 174 words in a sample dialogue, 33 [19%] were explicitly listed in the vocabulary words or phrases in the glossary). For a learner for whom all of these words are new, comprehension of the story would be a formidable task. Nation (2006a) recommends that for comprehension to occur in listening exercises, a rate of at least 95% known

words is recommended. In addition, vocabulary items are presented only once in the story, and once again in the explanation section, without creative recycling of the vocabulary items. One of the most important things for vocabulary acquisition is repeated exposure to vocabulary items (Nation, 2006b). ESLPod could be improved by using previous vocabulary items in the explanations of later vocabulary items, thus giving learners meaningful repeated exposure.

One positive aspect of ESLPod's treatment of vocabulary, however, is that new vocabulary items are explained using simple explanations. Overall, the text of both the stories and explanations consist of over 85% K1 words, with an additional roughly 5% of words at the K2 level (the 1000 and 2000 most common words, respectively; calculated using Cobb's Web Vocabprofile). In addition, multiple forms of vocabulary items are explained (e.g., the noun form, verb form, adjective form, etc.) There also seems to be a focus on collocations and idiomatic expressions, which are often of great interest to ESL/EFL learners.

Learner Fit

Because ESLPod is nearly entirely in an audio-only format, it would most likely appeal to aural learners as opposed to visual or kinesthetic/tactile learners. The addition of the Learning Guides could make the podcasts more accessible to visual learners (who could then read the transcript as they listen), although at additional cost.

Although individual podcasts are not specifically geared toward specific levels of learners, the podcast series as a whole would most likely be most beneficial to high-beginner to intermediate students. The slowed speech rate during both the story and the explanations would most likely

not be beneficial to advanced learners. However, the cultural elements that are explained could be beneficial to learners of any level, and the various forms of the vocabulary items and idiomatic expressions could benefit advanced learners as well.

ESLPod seems to be designed for individual learners to use at home or on the go. However, because vocabulary is not recycled and the Learning Guides provide minimal additional information other than a transcript, vocabulary definitions, and a short cultural note, the content contained in the ESLPod podcasts could be best put to use in conjunction with classroom-based learning where a teacher can reuse vocabulary items that appear in the podcast. While perhaps a criticism of podcasting as a whole, there is no chance for interaction in the use of ESLPod, thus making the incorporation of ESLPod into classroom-based exercises even more vital.

3. SUMMARY

Overall, ESLPod offers ESL and EFL students a mostly-free option for regular listening practice that contains cultural elements, pertinent idiomatic expressions and other vocabulary, and dialogues at multiple rates of speech. However, there is no chance for output or interaction among learners, both important elements in L2 learning.

Implementation Possibilities: 4.5

Pedagogical Features: 3.5

Sociolinguistic Accuracy: 4

Use of Computer Capabilities: 3.5

Ease of Use: 5

Overall Evaluation: 4

Value for Money: 3.5

4. PRODUCER DETAILS

Center for Educational Development, Inc.

Dr. Lucy Tse (producer and writer), Dr. Jeff McQuillan (host)

eslpod@eslpod.com

<http://www.eslpod.com>

5. REVIEWER INFORMATION

Ryan T. Miller

rtmiller@andrew.cmu.edu

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