# Topic: Splendid Speaking Case Study

Peter Travis gives a background to the Splendid Speaking podcast.

## This article first appeared in the IATEFL CALL Review 2007

### Biodata

Peter Travis is the Co-Founder of Flo-Joe, the website for Cambridge Exam preparation
He developed the Splendid Speaking website and also trains language teachers in the use
of ICT in teaching and learning.

### Summary

This case study will outline the development of the Splendid Speaking podcasts, which
feature recorded interviews with advanced learners of English carried out with Skype, the
computer programme for making telephone calls over the Internet. The interviews
demonstrate common speaking examination-type tasks whilst the recordings and
transcripts are made available to students and teachers worldwide for download.
The paper will outline the background to and associated aims of this project, detailing the
steps involved in both preparing for and carrying out the interviews as well as publishing
the podcasts. This will include an overview of the syllabus for the interviews as well as
an explanation of the choice of technology used.

### Background

For six years I have been working with my colleague Fiona Joseph at Flo-Joe, the website
for students and teachers preparing for Cambridge exams. The website has free and
subscription materials to help learners with the various parts of the Cambridge FCE, CAE
and CPE exams, with a particular focus on the writing, reading and grammar papers. The
website is well-established, with some 80,000 unique visitors each month.

We have always been keen to explore ways in which we can support teachers and
learners in their exam preparation and with the emergence of podcasting, we started
'Flo-Joe Radio' in 2005, which supports students preparing for CAE and consists of
repurposed material from our weekly newsletter. Flo-Joe Radio is still live and updated
regularly and can be listened to at the following address:
http://www.splendid-learning.co.uk/podcast/

Our early experiences of podcasting were extremely positive as was the feedback we
were getting from teachers and learners. About this time we were also looking at ways we
could offer support for the speaking papers of the Cambridge ESOL exams as we were
receiving many requests from learners looking for advice and guidance in this area. Once

again, technology seemed to offer a solution. Skype, a computer program for making free telephone calls over the Internet was also emerging as a popular form of communication amongst our target audience, with many students in our forum pages attempting to make contact with each other through Skype to practise their speaking skills.

We had little experience of using Skype at the time but realised that combined with podcasting, the two technologies offered a way in which students could be supported in developing their speaking skills. This was the impetus for the Splendid Speaking Podcasts.

## The Splendid Speaking Podcast: Project Aims

We decided that we would offer a series of recorded interviews with advanced level learners through Skype. The focus of these interviews would be on particular speaking skills and the context would be either any advanced level English exam the learner might be preparing for or work-based speaking situations such as giving presentations or making introductions. The recordings would be delivered as podcasts and have three components:

- an introduction to the skill and context
- the interview itself
- and feedback on the speaker's performance.

Listeners would be supported with transcripts and listening tasks. With limited time to devote to the project we decided that interviews would be offered on a 'first come -first served' basis, with a maximum of four half-hour set sessions a week. To make this project worthwhile we obviously needed to reach as wide an audience as possible and whilst the Skype interviews would only benefit relatively small numbers of learners, recording these interviews as podcasts would enable us to disseminate to a far greater number of people. We planned to run the project over 26 weeks with the completed recordings and transcripts to remain available as a resource for teachers and learners visiting the Splendid Speaking website. We wanted the podcasts to be as interactive as possible, so built into each recording would be questions which required the listener to evaluate the speaker's performance, both in their ability to use the skill(s) in question as well as their use of English. There would also be comprehension questions included within the downloadable transcripts.

Finally, we also wanted this project to be a springboard for future projects, namely connecting learners using web 2.0 technologies. We encouraged learners to make contact independently of us for speaking practice and then ultimately to have the confidence and

ability to host their own podcasts as personal audio portfolios with peer feedback. Certainly in order for the latter aim to be realised the technology used would need to be very user-friendly. 'Flo-Joe Radio' is based on the DIY approach to podcasting. We developed the website to host the podcasts ourselves, published our own RSS feed and delivered the MP3 and Flash files using third party products. However, this was not a model we could disseminate to teachers and learners. Sites like Odeo and Podomatic were making the production of podcasts ever more accessible and we therefore decided to host our podcasts on Podomatic and to link to them from our own Splendid Speaking website.

## Preparation

We decided on a negotiated syllabus which would allow interviews to be determined by the needs of the interviewees. In general the tasks were going to focus around the following typical exam tasks:

1) Introductions
2) Long turns
3) Role Play
4) Discussions

By this time we were piloting a new product called 'Splendid Speaking' which focussed on developing speaking strategies for advanced learners. Many of these strategies were used as the basis of the interviews. Example topics covered included:

- Memorable Introductions
- Active Listening
- Responding to Questions
- Making Spontaneous Talks
- Signposting Talks
- Describing Graphics
  Expressing and Justifying Opinions
- Reaching Agreement

In terms of the technology used, downloading and installing Skype was straightforward. The latest version weighs in at a modest 19MB and the installation was trouble-free. For those unfamiliar with Skype, there is a thorough help section on the website which will answer most questions. Our needs were quite modest and were covered by the free options in Skype, namely calling other Skype users one-to-one and through the conference facility for paired interviews. In order to record the interviews we purchased a third party product called Powergramo which, once downloaded and installed, appears within the Skype menu and works seamlessly. So, we had Skype, a Skype address and a

means of recording the conversations. We already had experience in using Audacity for editing audio files and were happy to continue with this wonderful, free editing tool.

The next step was creating somewhere where the podcasts were to be hosted. Rather than do this on the dedicated Splendid Speaking website we chose to use a podcasting hosting service. As outlined above, we wanted to use something that teachers and students could adopt themselves. We also needed something reliable and which would allow us to track user statistics. Whilst Podomatic offers a free service, more than adequate for small scale use, we were expecting to reach 1,000 plus downloads a day within the timescale of the project so paid for the service's 'Pro' account, which cost 90 dollars a year and could be upgraded if necessary. The account was set up and can be found at this address: http://www.splendidspeaking.podomatic.com

Although hosted at Podomatic, we also wanted to embed the podcasts from within our own dedicated site. There are a number of Flash MP3 players available for download on the web. You simply add the code to your web page, add the link to your MP3 file on the external server and the podcast plays as if it's on your own site. However, we encouraged comments from our users as well so decided to install Wordpress, an open source blog, along with the Podpress plugin, which allows the user to embed podcasts from within Wordpress.

Having set up the equipment we were ready to advertise to prospective interviewees. We invited learners who receive the weekly CAE and CPE newsletter from the Flo-Joe site, to take part in the project. A timetable for interviews was made available on the Splendid Speaking website and students were invited to select a time, to inform us of their chosen slot and to email us their Skype address. We quickly built up a series of interviews, sometimes with individuals, other times with two students at the same time, paired up on the basis of their target exam. Clearly, dealing with an international audience posed two problems: it was necessary to ensure everyone was able to calculate GMT correctly, something which sometimes caused a great deal of confusion. Also the times we were offering, which were late evening sessions twice a week, meant there were always going to be people unable to join the project due to time differences.

To make contact in Skype is pretty straightforward. You place the address into the Skype search box and when the name appears simply double clicking lets the person know you are trying to make contact with them. If they are happy to do this and accept your contact request their Skype name will appear in your list. As bookings were taken and contact made, we emailed or texted the person from within Skype to arrange a test call. This informal chat gave us the chance to ascertain the person's reasons for studying English, their target examination if any and to get their permission to be recorded.

## The Interviews

At the time of writing we have been interview students for approximately 4 months and can outline the process involved. Shortly before the interview, the student is emailed a task created by us or directed to an exam board website where they can download a specific sample practice question. Rather than simply treat the interview as a test, we often send the student appropriate strategies from the Splendid Speaking course and tell that this will be something we will focus on during feedback. At the given time we make contact with the interviewee either as an individual one-to-one call or through the conference facility if there is a paired interview arranged. In the vast majority of cases the interviews are very successful. The sound quality is often as good as you would expect over the phone if not better and without fail, the students are able to perform their set tasks admirably as can be witnessed from the recorded podcasts.

There is often a delay of up to two weeks before the recorded interview is published as a podcast and rather than keep the student waiting until then for feedback, the end of the interview is spent giving the person concerned general feedback on their performance. However, this is done confidentially and does not appear in the completed recording.

With the interview over the recording is saved to the PC through Powergramo, which you do simply by right-clicking the name of the recording and saving it to your chosen destination. The next stage involves editing the Powergramo generated .ogg file which can be done in Audacity and then recording and adding the introduction and feedback sections. We have opted to script these sections as we feel the points we are making about the interviewee's performance need to be presented in a very structured way and as clearly as possible.

Finally, the completed .ogg file is converted to an MP3 file. This can be done in Audacity with the addition of a freely available plugin. The file is then uploaded to Podomatic, which has always proved to be reasonably straightforward and trouble-free. As with any blog you are able to add written notes relating to each podcast and invite listeners to leave comments.

## Conclusion

The project is now in week 20 and we have found it enormously rewarding both in terms of the relative technical simplicity in achieving a successful outcome and of course in the opportunity it gives us to communicate directly with students from around the world. It should be pointed out that it can be quite time consuming producing each podcast. Arranging the interviews and the tasks can be completed quite quickly and the interview itself will only take 20 to 30 minutes. However, the editing of the recorded interviews, scripting of the introduction and the cutting and pasting of elements of the interview as

examples to be studied in the feedback section can take time. In total the production of each podcast probably amounts to around 4 or 5 hours of work per week.

However, the time spent has been worthwhile. The podcast is currently achieving almost 1,000 downloads a day and looks to exceed our initial target. Feedback from both teachers and students has been extremely encouraging.

During the course of this project it has become clear that students would appreciate the opportunity to connect to other English learners for speaking practice and clearly there is clearly a demand for the many websites that now offer language learners the chance to connect with others through technology such as Skype. We have also had several students who have expressed an interest in producing their own podcast, inviting colleagues or their teacher to offer feedback. We see this as a very exciting opportunity for language students: the ability to practice their speaking individually, one-to-one or in group discussions through VOIP technology such as Skype and to post a recording of this independently for review. The Flo-Joe website has recently seen an increase in the number of students prepared to post written work to our forums in order that other students can peer review their work. Although posting audio files for review would technically be more demanding, experience of the Splendid Speaking podcast has shown that this isn't too intimidating. The question remains whether students would find it useful to create their own podcasts, a subject which may well prove the foundation of our next project.

## References

Audacity
http://audacity.sourceforge.net/
Flo-Joe
http://www.flo-joe.co.uk
Flo-Joe Radio
http://www.splendid-learning.co.uk/podcast/
Odeo
http://odeo.com/
Podomatic
http://www.podomatic.com
PowerGramo
http://www.powergramo.com
Skype:
http://www.skype.com
The Splendid Speaking Podcast:
http://www.splendidspeaking.podomatic.com
Splendid Speaking (includes links to timetable and available student profiles)
http://www.splendid-speaking.com