

Sonocent Audio Notetaker: an exploration

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The history of technology is full of examples of a technology created for one particular purpose and then being used in a wholly different way. Twitter is a well-known example. Created to update parents on their children's whereabouts in short 140-character messages, it is now used in ways its creators could scarcely have imagined, from advertising to forging political events.

It was with this in mind that I first set out to explore Sonocent Audio Notetaker (AN), a piece of software created to help students write notes. I mentioned Sonocent in Modern English Teacher last year (25/1), in the context of EAP (English for Academic Purposes). The current article describes my continuing journey of exploration.

When we discuss technologies, we talk about their 'affordances', "the purposes to which they seem most easily to lend themselves" (Pegrum 2014: 7). Sonocent is a piece of software which allows students to record speech, producing a visualisation in chunks.

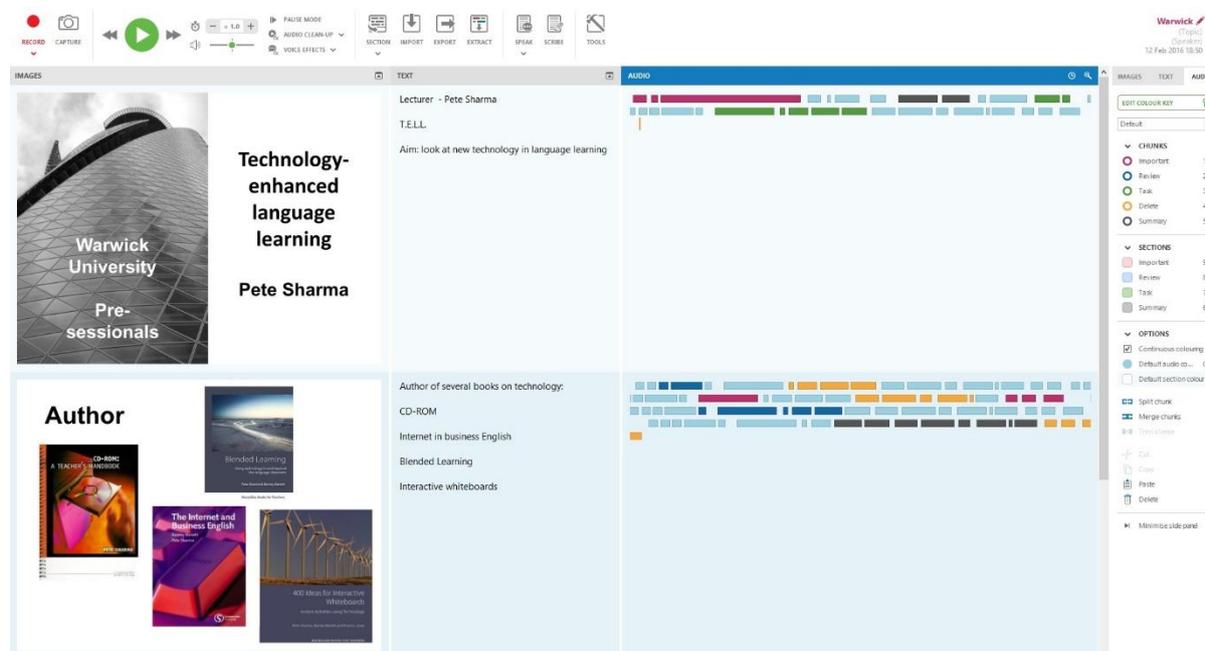


Fig. 1 Sonocent Audio Notetaker

Users can change the colour of each chunk to show, for example, whether an utterance is important, whether it is part of a review or a summary, or whether it is redundant. Students can listen and re-listen to relevant pieces of a lecture in their own time, and then work at their own pace to complete their notes. The experience of doing this in an on-screen environment, where they can see the chunks a bit like text, is very different to recording a lecture with a DAR (digital audio recorder) or Smartphone.

As documented in MET, I tried out Sonocent in an EAP context, hooking up my computer with a powerful external microphone, but nevertheless experienced difficulties recording in a big lecture theatre. I did record short sections of my students' final presentations, and felt it was helpful to use these clips later in order to finalize students' grades.

My first step in exploring this software was gaining access to some innovative materials devised by Richard Cauldwell to help students in his area of expertise: pronunciation. Cauldwell opened my eyes to the interesting possibility of transplanting a textbook unit into AN. Pictures can be added to the image pane, and instructions in the reference pane, which was originally intended for adding academic sources to a set of notes.

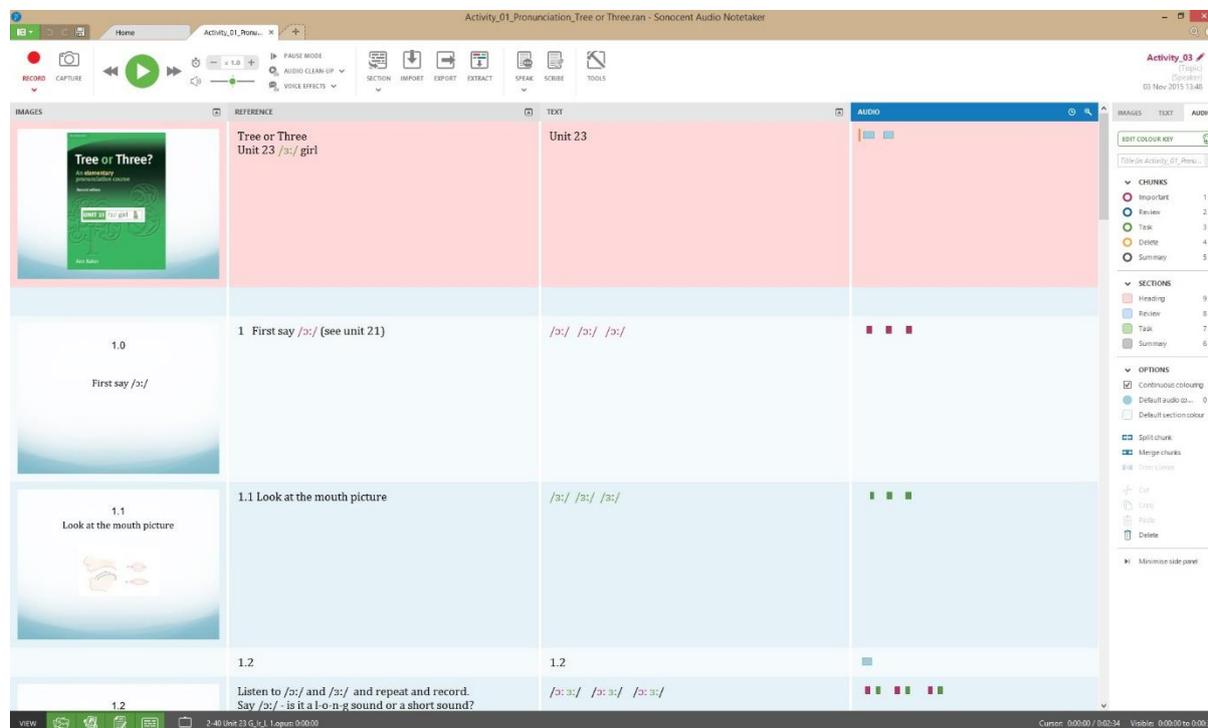


Fig. 2 Minimal pairs exercise

Cauldwell explains that this software enables him to manipulate small sound chunks. In one activity, students practise making the vowel sounds /ɜ:/ as in *Paul* and /ɜ:/ as in *Pearl* distinct and clear. Presumably, this type of activity can be done with all minimal pairs, building up a bank of such materials. At one point, students are asked to colour the sound they hear, which should help them reinforce the difference in the two sounds.

In the area of listening, Cauldwell suggests that each student, or each group, can choose one or several audio chunks which they find particularly difficult to understand and bring these to class or send them to the teacher. I think learners would find this motivating.

Having expanded my own horizons as to the possible uses of Sonocent in ELT contexts, I set about exploring other possibilities. Here are some ideas, grouped by language area: grammar, vocabulary and the four language skills.

Grammar

AN could be useful in untangling the area of contractions, such as *I'd've*. The teacher records examples of such contractions in small chunks; the students listen, decide on the uncontracted form and type out it out in full.

Vocabulary

Students could use AN to build up their own set of key words, recorded with their pronunciation. The teacher can initiate this by recording a list of key new words and phrases at the end of each teaching week.

Listening

AN offers huge possibilities for importing audio clips from YouTube and TED.com and having students work on these in their own time, transcribing them using the pause control.

In Business English contexts, students can analyse the language of meetings. The teacher first sends a recording of a meeting, either ELT material, or even a real meeting. The students then colour code the audio chunks using the drop-down menus, as in the screen-shot below. Here, Sonocent is an analysis tool to enable students to notice turn-taking, signalling language etc.

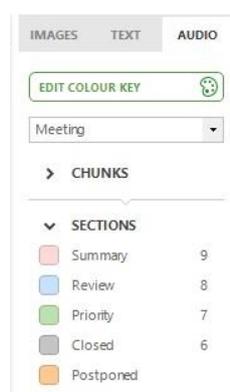


Fig. 3 Language of meetings – audio chunks

Reading

Students work on this language skill whenever they read text in the reference pane. They could read and then ‘sound script’ a short extract from a presentation, using bold and capitalisation to highlight word-stress and intonation, in order to prepare it for spoken delivery.

Speaking

AN provides many opportunities for speaking practice. Students can practise their delivery and record their attempt, rehearse and re-record this until they are satisfied and submit the result to the teacher. AN is an obvious tool for providing constructive feedback by highlighting words and phrases and adding text notes. As described above, the teacher can also use presentation excerpts for assessment purposes.

I have found it easy to create mp4s of presentations, importing PowerPoint slides; these can be mailed to students to provide pre-lesson input within a ‘flipped classroom’ model. This is an alternative to using a screen-recorder program, such as Camtasia.

Writing

AN can be used to help students in the area of spelling. First, the teacher records a set of words which students listen to and type in the writing pane. The teacher then reveals the answer, focusing on the difficult relationship in English between sound and spelling.

AN can help learners with paragraph construction. First the teacher sends audio file for students to transcribe. Afterwards, the students construct a paragraph from their transcription. They can change the colour of the text to highlight the topic sentence, or the linkers.

This exploration bears out the fact that a piece of software created for a specific purpose can be used in many new and different ways. It will be interesting to see if this one, developed to help students take notes, has a wider future role to play in general English teaching.

<https://www.sonocent.com/en/>

Bio

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References

Pegrum, M (2014) *Mobile Learning* London: Palgrave Macmillan

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