GRABBING AUDIO AND VIDEO STREAMING FILES
FROM THE WEB
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You may have faced a problem of not being able to use some of the Web materials in class due to the simple reason of them being provided in a streaming format. Unless you have a reasonably fast connection and can use the school lab for that purpose, you are helpless trying to provide your students with a chance of enjoying audio/video clips with intriguing interviews, songs whose lyrics you may want to analyse or any other material of that kind you find perfect for enhancing your class. Whether audio or video, RealAudio or MS Windows Media format, they are usually equally non-downloadable.

Long ago, I managed to find a solution to the problem of capturing the audio files of my choice I wanted to include in the listening practice of my classes. In fact, it was the piece of software called Audiograbber which did the job for me. Audiograbber (http://www.audiograbber.com-us.net) is a free programme that basically copies music and stores it on your computers hard drive. Its main purpose, I believe, was to copy music from CDs. There is also an option to copy music through the soundcard (though with a slight sound degradation) as well as copy sound via the soundcard from an external source, such as the cassette player or the radio.
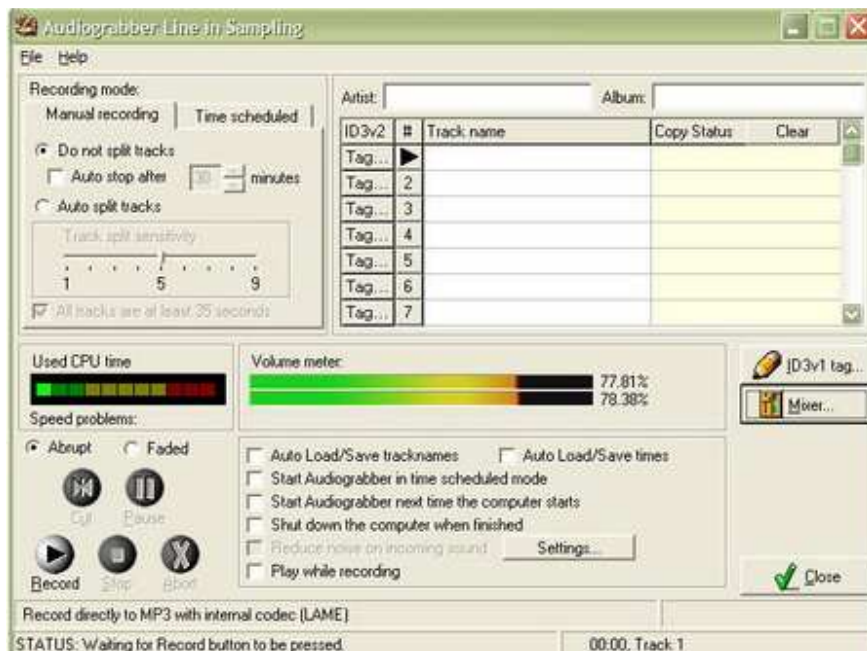

Picture 1. *Audiograbber's main window*

Also, Audiograbber can connect to a database on the Internet and download disc information such as track names. It has a "normalise" function to make tracks from different CDs

sound equally loud. The tracks can be saved as WAV files or converted to MP3 or WMA files with external programs or internal codecs such as the LAME freeware MP3, or MS Windows Media Audio codec.

Yet the function I found the most useful for my purpose was grabbing the sound from the Internet audio streaming sources. The whole procedure is fairly simple: once you have downloaded the software and installed it, you have to set it up at least to be able to find the captured files on the hard drive later on after the session. Also the output format needs to be specified. You have to choose options of e.g. saving the sound files as MP3s at 128kb/s quality, which is good enough for majority of applications while playing the output files in class. Remember, if you go for MP3 format, you will have to download and install its codec first, such as The LAME, free software ideally serving the purpose, by copying the lame.dll file into the Audiograbber directory. For more information on codecs go to: http://www.free-codecs.com

Picture 2. *Audiograbber's Line in recording window*

In order to grab audio online with Audiograbber you have to use the menu [File|Line in sampling], set the controls to the manual mode, if you like to monitor the recording and control it manually, then use the 'mixer' option to check one of the available boxes responsible for grabbing sound. From my experience, checking either 'line in' or 'mixed source' box should do the trick. Once you have done that, play some music from the Net, a saved sound file or a CD to see if the sound level is visible on the volume meter. Finally, adjust it with the mixer slide bar or, if the volume levels do not appear, check another box choosing e.g. 'mixed source.' Now you are ready to start your audiograbbing session.

Nevertheless, I have recently faced another challenge, namely the problem of downloading streaming video files. Since I happen to train Air Force officers and try to upgrade

their command of military English, I found it reasonable to look for authentic materials on the Web, ideally briefings, as part of their duty is understanding them to be able to operate within NATO and possibly brief/debrief others as well. The sites which I found perfect in that respect are http://www.pentagonchannel.mil and http://www.defenselink.mil/transcripts/. The former is a Website for a TV channel offering you a streaming video with live coverage of their programme, which I assume is typically available for American cable TV. Also, it provides you recorded programmes broadcast on their channel. Clicking on any of the pictures listed in the main window opens up a separate panel for video broadcasts which includes a sidebar with lots of subchannels to choose from such as *Newscasts, Top Stories* or *Briefings,* the last one with recent US military briefings directly from Pentagon or Iraq itself to a large extent. The latter site offers current as well as archived transcripts of the briefings available from the Pentagon Channel in the video format. Combined, they are perfect authentic materials to analyse in any English for military class for watching, listening and text analysis. In the above case the download is basically easy as each video screen is supplemented by a comment with an icon allowing you for a direct download of the video file.

Much more of a problem, though, posed capturing some video files from certain other sites. As my college students find it highly appropriate to be exposed at listening/phonetics classes to a variety of English dialects enhancing their understanding of regional differences in the language, I found the BBC's *Video Nation* (http://www.bbc.co.uk/videonation/) be cut out for that purpose. The site is a way to meet people from across the UK and hear what they say about their lives and the world around them. You can watch the video clips and test your comprehension in *Listen out!*, check what you have heard by looking at tapescripts, discover facts about life in the UK in *Did you know*, practise your grammar and vocabulary skills in *Language Fix*, then *Get talking!* to develop your speaking skills.

Actually, the site offers a RealVideo clip database providing you with several logically arranged categories of database search. You may want to focus on the dialects throughout Britain and all you have to do to watch people from e.g. Leeds is either to locate the region/person on the map or use a drop down menu with a list of places around the UK. If your preference is to learn what some British people's opinions on different subjects are, go for a thematically arranged option at http://www.bbc.co.uk/videonation/archive/, providing a wide choice of clips from such Categories as *Tees, Pets* or *Sport*, Features such as *Summer, Race UK* or *Fat Nation*, or Local Sites and other search array of your choice including alphabetical arrangement (both by video title and author's surname) as well as keyword search.

Although most of the clips mentioned above are too small to be displayed in a regular full screen mode as they lose much of their video quality then, it is worthwhile downloading the files in a video format to make the activities even more attractive to the class since the sound quality is preserved while the students will still have the advantage of watching the real people talking. If you lack video presentation facilities in your classroom allowing you to play the video files directly from the computer, one other option would be applying Audiograbber to capture and then play just the sound files. Still one other might be copying the videos from the computer onto a VHS tape and make use of a regular combination of a video player/recorder with a TV set to make the presentation possible. Yet, in that case, it is advisable not to rely on the speakers from the TV set, unless it is a state-of-the-art device, but play the sound from the videotape via cable
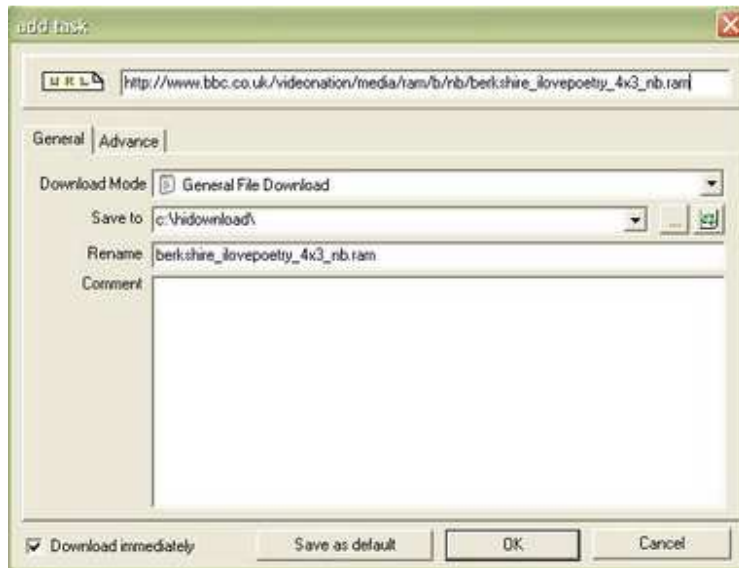
through some standalone HiFi or an amplifier to preserve initial quality of the recording and provide your students with as much degree of listening comfort as possible.

The piece of software I found worth recommending for the video capture purpose is HiDownload from http://www.streamingstar.com/, which makes it possible to download files, record RealMedia, Windows Media, MP3 streams as well as recently added QuickTime Streaming. As the streaming files' URLs are usually hidden behind JavaScript or ActiveX scripts, you are typically able only to save some *.ram address redirecting you to the actual file which is played live only and cannot be saved the way you normally do it to e.g. *.doc or *pdf files available on the Web. Yet, the program also features *URL Helper* to locate the actual files to record.
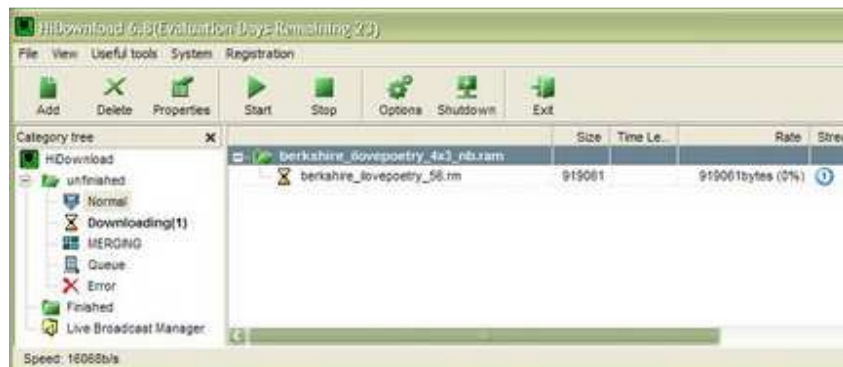

Picture 3. *HiDownload main window*

Once you have downloaded the software and installed it, you should start it to have a look behind the *Options* button to configure the programme al least to specify the location of your virus scanner and set up the download directory, which is C:\hidownload\ by default. When you start the programme (hit *Evaluate* button to start working with it due to its temporary 30-day licence), apart from the main window, you will see its icon residing in the tray and a bigger *Drop Target* icon (which you can disable by clicking the right mouse button on it and choosing the option) hanging on top of the screen in central location. That means you can now start your Web browser to locate the video files you want to record onto the hard drive of your computer. Once you find the link, use the right mouse button to choose the *Copy the URL/link* option which activates the *add task* window (*see below*) with an automatically entered file source address.

Picture 4. *'Add task' window*

Now, you have to click OK and watch the file download/record into the directory you specified to be able to locate it later (check for *Save to* option like in Picture 4).

Picture 5. *Recording in progress*

You can monitor the progress in the main window which pops up immediately (see Picture 5) until you see the whole file in the specified directory. One piece of advice on actually making use of the files is that although the session is saved in one directory, it leaves you with a wide confusing range of similarly named files including the video you wanted to have. Locating the right one is usually simple since it is usually the biggest file on the list with the extension '*.@@@1'. When you get rid of the extra extension (e.g. in MS Windows Explorer or working directly with the files in the folder) and possibly some additional redundant numbers standing for the name of the session such as [1], [2], etc., the remaining should be your downloaded video file name with the proper extension depending on the type of the recorded file: *.rm, *wmv, *.asf, etc.

Finally, in case you do not like handling RealMedia or Windows Media files, an extra piece of software from the same site, namely *Digital Media Converter*, makes it easy for you to convert video and audio files from one format to another. Now you can organise and batch convert all your video and audio files between: VCD, DVD, AVI (DivX, MS MPEG4, uncompressed, etc), MPEG-1, MPEG-2 (PAL, NTSC), MP3, MOV, WMA, WMV, and WAV formats. Unfortunately, its availability is also limited to just 10 days after installation. Yet, you may try out one other option for converting only audio files for you might be dBpower AMP Music Converter available from: http://www.dbpoweramp.com.

References

More information on downloading streaming media:

- http://all-streaming-media.com/streaming-media-faq/faq-streambox-vcr-download-problems.htm

More information on codecs:

- http://www.free-codecs.com

Other recommended sites for downloading educational grade streaming media:

- http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/learningenglish/multimedia/index.shtml
- http://www.learnenglish.org.uk/songlyrics_frame.html
- http://www.bbc.co.uk/arts/poetry/outloud/
- http://www.english-trailers.com