

# languages ICT



## What are mp3 files for MFL?

Sound is key to learning foreign languages as pupils need to develop the communication skills of listening and speaking, as well as reading and writing. Pupils can record and re-record audio files in the target language, to focus on their pronunciation and intonation, listening repeatedly and evaluating their spoken language. Activities with aural support also help those pupils with an auditory preferred style of learning. For example, an electronic worksheet with text linked to target language sound files or an electronic big book in PowerPoint, where sound effects are used to support the flow of the target language story.

MP3 (Motion Picture Experts Group Audio Layer 3) files are simply audio files in compressed format and, as such, are very versatile. Being compressed, they are smaller, and more easily portable or transferable. They can be quickly downloaded from the Internet and played on computers, laptops and MP3 players, offering opportunities to link learning more closely with pupils' leisure activities. MP3 files can be used in documents, presentations, web pages or as email attachments, facilitating communication with target language speakers abroad. Sound quality is very good and, for both teacher and learner of modern languages, they promise much and make the world of digital audio more accessible than ever before.

### Size matters!

A traditional Wave (wav) file can be very large. For example, a three minute music track on a CD can be about 35 megabytes while the same file in MP3 format might be one tenth of the size and still be at near-CD quality! For modern languages, smaller size means enhanced storage capabilities, either on a CD or a network, and greater ease of transfer via e-mail. High quality sound really can help learners to develop listening skills in an optimum audio environment.

### Easy work!

It is not hard to make MP3 recordings or convert wav files to MP3 format. A free sound editor such as Audacity allows you to make and save recordings as MP3 files, so long as you have an MP3 encoder on your pc. The school's ICT technician can download and install one if necessary. Imported wav files can be converted to MP3 format on Audacity or other sound editors. Once saved as MP3 files, these compressed recordings can very easily be stored, moved and accessed.

### Creating resources

MP3 files, in common with other audio files, can be embedded into documents or accessed via hyperlinks. They can be accessed from the network and used for whole class activities on the interactive whiteboard or for individual learning in a computer suite. In electronic worksheets or in presentations, MP3 files serve many purposes. For consolidating vocabulary, an image can be linked to an MP3 recording. A digital photograph might be linked to a more prolonged recording which pupils access prior to completing a task, where it be written, spoken or drag and drop comprehension. Digital media allows teachers to be ever more creative in preparing resources. A sound editor such as Audacity enables special effects, such as Fade In, Fade Out to be added to recordings. With modest sound editing skills, voice recordings can be mixed with MP3 music loops, often downloadable as freeware, and thus multimedia MP3 resources are created. These may be used for story-telling using presentation software.

### Flexible access

Over time, an audio resource bank can be stored on a network, available for flexible access, in class, from multimedia suites or from home if network access is possible. Stored materials are easily accessible, and easily downloadable, all the more so given the size of MP3 files and the spread of broadband. This is their key advantage over wav files, thus enabling pupils to place audio resources on their home computer, a CD or even an MP3 player. In the latter case, resources are truly portable, and pupils enjoy totally flexible access to quality audio.

### Pupils and MP3

Pupils, like teachers, can take advantage of the compression and versatility of MP3 files to create interesting work. Digital voice recorders are increasingly common. They usually have a built-in microphone for recording, but some will take an external one. They can save in MP3 format. MP3 players

are very popular and often can be used or adapted for voice recording. Using MP3 players or voice recorders, pupils can conduct interviews, practise dialogues, record role plays in communicative tasks and store their MP3 recordings for later use or transfer to a PC or the school network. If quite short recordings are made on a computer (around 30-35 seconds of speech) they can be saved as MP3 files and sent home by email. At home, the pupil can store the recordings on a hard drive of a pc or on an MP3 player to be listened to with complete flexibility. Recordings can, of course, be made on minidisk or cassette tape and transferred to a PC. Sound editors enable the cleaning of cassette recordings prior to saving as MP3 files.

Pupils may use MP3 files to prepare for oral exams. They can record their answers to printed questions, save them as MP3 files and copy to a CD or to an MP3 player. They could also take advantage of the reduced size of the format to email short snippets, perhaps of a Foreign Language Assistant, home from school for further practice.

Email projects, of course, are an area where MP3 files come into their own. The compressed nature of the format really does allow voice recordings to be sent to e-pals in partner schools in target language countries. This is feasible with MP3 files where it never could be with wav files. For example, a 30 second recording saved as a Wave file is about 5.7MB, while the same file saved in MP3 format is only 540KB, about one tenth of the size and eminently transferable by email. This versatility greatly facilitates communication with partner schools abroad. If email is not suitable for sending MP3 recordings, a CD will hold up to 600mb, enough for numerous MP3 voice recordings.

In creative work pupils can save recordings as MP3 files. They can take digital photographs of school and add their own audio comments to create a multimedia slide show on the theme of "My School". More ambitiously, pupils can record a Foreign Language Assistant answering a limited number of questions on the theme of "My home town". They could then record their own commentary in the target language on the Foreign Language Assistant's home town and weave sound clips of both recordings into a presentation based on downloaded images or digital photos.

### The Future

The MP3 format holds great potential for language learners. Its portability and size really do make language learning more flexible. Communication projects using audio files are more easily achievable while learning anywhere anytime is a real possibility if pupils use the increasingly common MP3 player to store sound files. Internet radio offers a host of opportunities to listen to downloadable programmes in MP3 format, while podcasting, a form of personal web broadcast downloaded automatically to an i-pod, although still a new phenomenon, has great potential.

### Useful links

German Radio: [Deutsche Welle](http://www.dw-world.de/dw/0,1595,8030,00.html) (www.dw-world.de/dw/0,1595,8030,00.html) offers downloadable news bulletins in mp3 format spoken slowly, plus online German courses.

Podcasting: [I-Podder](http://www.ipodder.org) (www.ipodder.org)

Freeware sound editor: [Audacity Sound Editor](http://audacity.sourceforge.net) (http://audacity.sourceforge.net)

Becta Schools: [Using electronic worksheets in MFL](http://schools.becta.org.uk/index.php?section=tl&rid=8631) (http://schools.becta.org.uk/index.php?section=tl&rid=8631)

Becta Schools: [Using electronic flashcards in MFL](http://schools.becta.org.uk/index.php?section=tl&catcode=as_cu_pr_sub_09&rid=9294) (http://schools.becta.org.uk/index.php?section=tl&catcode=as\_cu\_pr\_sub\_09&rid=9294)  
PIECast for MFL learners from [Partners in Excellence](http://www.pie.org.uk/) (www.pie.org.uk/)

*To read about tried and tested ideas for using mp3 files, try searching the Useful ICT ideas, effective language lessons database on the Languages ICT website.*

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