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Producing and researching podcasts as a reflective medium in English language teaching

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1. Introduction

Since podcasting's inception in the mid-2000s, it has been used in a variety of ways in education and for language learning and teaching. In English language teaching (ELT), podcasts have been well-documented as target language resources introduced by teachers or utilised by learners autonomously (e.g. Hamzaoğlu & Koçoğlu, 2016). The medium has also been experimented with by language teachers as spaces for critical reflection and professional engagement. Since 2014, the authors of this article have been collaborating on *The TEFLology Podcast*, a long-running ELT podcast made for teachers, and concurrently investigating the uses and roles of the medium in our professional lives.

In this summary, we will chart some of the studies that have already been conducted in our body of work, share our ongoing investigations, and suggest some future research directions.

2. Overview of *The TEFLology Podcast*

In 2014, the writers launched *The TEFLology Podcast* as a space to spur collaborative reflection on ELT-related matters and applied linguistics. The original intention of the project was to capture the essence of staffroom discussions we were already having and share them publicly. Over time, however, we began to appreciate the effect that producing the podcast was having on our own and others' knowledge acquisition and development, and the ways in which it was helping to maintain our professional engagement. While initially having a three-part discussion-based episode format with separate interview editions, the podcast shifted in 2021 to a long-form format combining interviews with expert guests with pre- and post-interview discussions between the hosts. The currently identified applications for teacher development, relevant to both producers and listeners, are listed in Turner et al. (2021), with the entire archive of episodes freely accessible at www.teflology-podcast.com.

3. Podcasts as reflective spaces in academia

There is growing awareness of the value of podcasting in academia, which is reflected in the recent publication of books dedicated to the medium (e.g. Cook, 2023). Indeed, podcasting can offer a fertile area of inquiry with regard to their reflective use by and for language educators, not solely because it is currently under-investigated, but because there are a range of dynamics that we feel are in particular need of exploration. Firstly, given the fact that podcasts are made for public dissemination, the way that this shapes and sustains teacher reflection is a question of interest. Also, as podcasts are largely independent professional development enterprises, we feel that their use should be critically evaluated and validated. In addition, as an audio-based medium characterised by its intimate and conversational

appeal, we are keen to examine podcasting's role as an accessible resource for knowledge creation. Therefore, in our ongoing research we are trying to understand:

- The reflexive relationship between podcast production and our professional identities,
- the podcast-based genre of reflective interaction between hosts,
- and the role of the podcasting medium for communication in academic fields.

4. Our studies to date

To date, we have used the podcast for research purposes in two ways. Firstly, we have used the production of the podcast in itself as a form of action research. Secondly, we have used podcast recordings and reflective interactions as data to explore the development of our knowledge and practice.

With regard to podcasting as action research, in one of our first projects, we brought together a diverse group of speakers to establish some points of commonality between different sub-disciplinary research areas through the implementation of a forum at a conference that was recorded and released as a podcast (Turner et al., 2019). Through dialogues and panel exchanges, our aim was to see if new connections could be achieved amongst the participants and for ourselves. In one instance, all the guests and facilitators connected over the phenomenon of student silence in communicative language learning settings. Here, the participants each brought their own areas of study to this theme, and the podcast forum gave them the opportunity to directly engage with each other. We concluded that such a format was effective at enabling researchers in different fields to find connections within a single topic through the assimilation of disparate ideas.

In addition to this action research-influenced work, we also came to reflect on how producing the podcast has influenced our professional development. As the podcast has grown to become instrumental in our professional lives, we began empirically investigating its role in the development of our conceptual knowledge through qualitative approaches such as collaborative autoethnography (Chang et al., 2013) and duoethnography (Norris & Sawyer, 2012). The first of these studies (Lowe et al., 2021) took the form of a collaborative autoethnography, which used previous podcast recordings as data that we coded through a dialogic process. We examined how the process of preparing for podcast segments, which involved conducting a mini literature review on a topic, influenced our understanding of a concept. We further explored how our discussion during the recording of the podcast led to a rethinking of the ideas we had developed. We suggested that this could be "an alternative method of initiating a cycle of reflecting, planning, acting, and observing" (p. 443), which differed from other forms of collaborative dialogue through the fact it was intended for public release and thus required both intensive preparation and critical engagement. We suggested that podcasting could act as an effective spur for teachers to engage with research, and as a catalyst for action research projects.

Under the same category and considering the implications of the public-facing nature of the podcast, two of us (Schaefer & Lowe, in press) engaged in a duoethnography on the formation and characteristics of what we term "critical co-presenterships" (Lowe et al., 2017). Similar to a critical friendship (Wachob, 2011), this is a relationship based on dialogue and reflection, but one that is public rather than private, and that contains elements of performance. This study revealed that critical co-presenterships are influenced by the potential inclusion of an audience, which the presenters have to consider when engaging in dialogue. Rather than asking questions only to explore the beliefs of their interlocutor, a critical co-presenter has to anticipate and voice the concerns of the audience, thus altering the relationship's dynamic. Further, the public nature of the recording pressures the presenters to come to a conclusion on a topic, and to one that has a broader relevance for the podcast listenership, rather than just for themselves.

Our latest study (Turner et al., 2023) uses "critical learning episodes" (CLEs) (Kiely & Davis, 2010) as a frame to identify particular co-constructive and interactive processes taking place through the utilisation of the current podcasting format. In this pilot study, we identified three collaborative

knowledge development processes, which could be traced across the presenters' pre-interview discussions, the segment with invited expert interviewees, and the post-interview reflections. The CLE processes identified were:

1. DESTABILISATION, in which presenters' understanding of a concept, expressed in the first part of the episode, are gradually destabilised as they encounter new perspectives from the interviewee and from their co-presenters.
2. EXPANSION, in which a previously held understanding is deepened through the interaction with guests and co-presenters. This is similar to destabilisation, but focuses on the enrichment of a perspective, rather than its undoing.
3. REINFORCEMENT, in which a previously held understanding or belief is not challenged or changed, but rather strengthened as a result of the interaction.

Our studies to date have used the podcast as a space for reflection, as an experimental research method, and as a site for data generation. We have experimented with auto- and duoethnographic approaches as primary forms of analyses, and are beginning to build a picture of how the medium is functioning in our professional lives. We will now discuss some potential extensions to our research.

5. Future directions for our podcast research

Given that there are numerous podcasts being made by groups of language teaching educators, there is an opportunity to further exploit and make use of this spoken content as data. This is something that is currently said to be lacking, with Lundström and Lundström (2021), for example, observing a mismatch between the medium's popularity and the paucity of empirical studies being conducted around the phenomena. In our work to date, we have been writing about podcasting from an emic perspective. As such, we would suggest that future work could focus on more etic analyses of podcast recordings as data. Given that they are naturalistic spaces for interaction, podcasts could be investigated to explore how teacher-podcasters co-construct discourses around their professional practice, including their beliefs and attitudes. Therefore, one future direction of our research would be to move beyond using our own podcast and ourselves as a site of inquiry, and instead focus on analysing the beliefs expressed by other groups of creators.

We have argued that our in-podcast reflections are informed by the presence of an audience. Therefore, another area of future research could be to develop a model of our podcast as constituting an ecosystem that details the interactions between us and our listeners. One aspect of this research would involve exploring how audience feedback specifically manifests, for example through direct contact or through social media engagement. Another would be the examination of how that feedback influences our own practice as podcast creators. In addition, a mode of inquiry that we have not yet approached is a consideration of how the actual listening of the podcast impacts the audience. Possible avenues for exploration could include the effectiveness of podcasts as a tool for enhancing professional skills and knowledge acquisition, and the accessibility of podcasts in terms of how inclusive they are in accommodating a diverse audience.

Finally, although we have begun identifying in language terms the nature of reflective talk in podcasting spaces, further in-depth and empirical studies are needed to solidify and build stronger descriptions of the specificities of the podcast genre as a reflective practice activity.

6. Conclusion

In this article, we have outlined our two-pronged activities of producing and researching podcasts as a reflective mechanism. Given the expansion of the medium and its potential for the production and dissemination of knowledge, we feel it is important to understand the unique dynamics of podcasting that can be harnessed for the purposes of professional growth. Early investigations have demonstrated

that the public-facing and dialogic nature of podcasts sets them apart from other professional development practices and is contributing constructive value to our sustained engagement as practitioners. Our research to date has focused on reflective studies of our own podcasting experiences, and from here we intend to produce future work that can add depth and nuance to our current observations, as well as broaden our investigations to learn about and start to formulate firmer accounts of podcasting practices in the field of ELT. We welcome other researchers to join us.

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