

Professional development and research engagement through podcasting

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Introduction

Advances in technology have provided English language teachers with new avenues of professional development, podcasting being one. Although podcasts are generally acknowledged as language learning tools (see Rosell-Aguilar, 2007), there has been limited conversation around the role of podcasting in the continuing professional development (CPD) of English language educators.

Since May 2014, we have produced *The TEFLology Podcast* (available at teflology-podcast.com) on a biweekly basis. Episodes include sections on ELT history, methodology, second language acquisition, and other topics of interest to practitioners. We also regularly produce episodes, and on occasion host conference forums, featuring interviews with researchers. Drawing on these experiences, in this article we will exemplify how podcasts may help practitioners to develop professionally through engaging with research, both as *producers* and *listeners*. In doing so, we will situate podcasts within the professional development, teacher education, and reflective practice traditions.

Exploring podcasts

Podcasts consist of audio recordings periodically delivered directly to consumers' smartphones, laptops, and tablets. Podcasts can be easily produced with readily available technology, and do not require professional expertise. In educational contexts, podcasts can act as a dynamic resource for creating, negotiating, and sharing knowledge. For example, Lee, McLoughlin, and Chan (2008) explored how podcast creation acted as a catalyst for collaborative knowledge building amongst a group of students, encouraging teamwork and creative problem-solving. More broadly, Birch and Weitkamp (2010) proposed the term "podologue" to describe how podcasts are used to stimulate public discourse.

There are, however, few studies regarding podcasts' applications in teacher training. One example is Güler and Özkan (2018), who studied how podcasts play a part in pre-service language teacher training, finding that participants possessed largely positive attitudes towards the inclusion of podcasts on teacher training courses. Beyond formal teacher education settings, i.e. "in the wild" (see Mann & Walsh, 2007), Lowe, Schaefer, and Turner (2017) offer a practical guide to making and using podcasts as a form of reflective, inquiry-based CPD. The following four sections will explore some benefits that both creating and listening to podcasts may have for teachers in terms of professional development and research engagement.

Exploring research through podcast production

For teachers, producing podcasts can act as an impetus to explore research and broaden disciplinary horizons. ELT has a number of different subareas, and as Medgyes (2017) has noted, it is common for specialists in one subdiscipline to be unaware of work being carried out in another. Teachers may also find it difficult to keep abreast of new developments, or have a comprehensive understanding of the field's scope.

As podcast producers, in order to provide the kind of diverse content required to keep an audience of practitioners engaged, teachers may have to move outside of their comfort zone and address issues in which they have no formal education or experience. This requires teachers to engage in informal learning projects, in which they investigate a new topic through reading professional texts and research literature. Creating podcasts thus provides the stimulus for autonomous CPD and engagement with research findings. Through the production of podcasts, teachers are encouraged not only to produce original public content, pushing them into areas they may never have explored before, but also to do so in correspondence with a scheduled release deadline. For example, in episode 68 of our podcast we explored the topic of collaborative writing in the language classroom. In preparation for this segment we read the

work of Storch (2013), and discussed at length the implications of research findings for the classroom. This discussion led us to explore an unfamiliar area of research.

We have further found that during the recording of the podcast, the ideas presented are discussed, challenged, and reflected on by each other as co-presenters, allowing for a deeper level of engagement with the content, as well as developing professional awareness and critical thinking. Farrell (2018) discusses the notion of Critical Friendships, which consist of two-way reflections that partly aim to reduce isolation and develop a sense of solidarity among peers. The *Critical Co-presenterships* (Lowe et al., 2017) between podcasters play a similar role in helping to develop professional identities and relationships, as well as critical attitudes towards research.

Interacting with researchers

There is an oft-lamented gap between ELT research and practice; teachers seldom engage with research, and academics often publish their work in a form which may not be teacher-friendly (Borg, 2009). There are, however, mediators who seek to bridge the gap between the two, and these bridge-building efforts have included a growing number of podcasts which focus on conversations with ELT researchers.

The dialogic nature of podcasts gives them several advantages as a space for researcher-teacher mediation. Firstly, the act of engaging in dialogue is very natural; listening to a conversation is a welcoming and familiar way of approaching a subject. Swiatek (2018) refers to podcasts as having “intimate bridging” qualities, in the way that knowledge boundaries are crossed through an informal medium.

For producers, conducting interviews, and all the stages involved in doing so, has great potential for professional development. In preparation for interviews, podcasters must (re)familiarize themselves with their interviewees’ work, which in itself is a developmental process. During the interview, podcasters have the opportunity to ask questions to clarify their understanding of ideas or implications of research findings. In addition, if guests’ responses seem unclear, interviewers can request clarification and confirm their understanding, allowing the talk to remain comprehensible for listeners. Finally, dialogue can ground the interview in human experience. While research may often appear abstract, a well-performed interview can find connections between the researchers’ motivations and their work, thus illuminating for listeners the relevance of research for practitioners. For example, in our sixth podcast interview, we spoke to Phil Benson, a learner autonomy researcher. Benson explained how his own experiences of language learning led him to take an interest in autonomy, thus addressing research at a more human level. We were further able to clarify our understanding regarding the implications of his work for the role of the teacher.

Facilitating dialogue between researchers

The opportunity for dialogue within a podcast extends beyond interaction between podcast producers and researchers; it can also facilitate direct communication among researchers from disparate subfields. This may take many forms, but one example with which we have experimented is a conference session format consisting of reflective interviews as described in the previous section, followed by a dialogue among the group of interviewees in response to each other’s interview content, with the aim of seeking connections between their respective interests. For example, in an exchange between Hugh Starkey and Reiko Yoshihara (see Schaefer, Turner, & Lowe, 2017), the two were able to find some common ground between their areas of global citizenship and feminist pedagogy. Specifically, they both found a shared concern that cultural relativism could be used to justify human rights violations in their respective areas of research.

While this kind of innovative conference session format may be uncommon in ELT, there are several advantages of encouraging these interactions. Due to the varied and fractured nature of research, individual researchers working in ELT may know little about each other’s output. However, interaction among researchers and practitioners could lead to a shared understanding of wider ELT practices. Broadening one’s awareness of other sub-fields may lead to new avenues of inquiry and collaboration that could result in the development of novel theories and

ideas for research. In our experience, such interactions often lead to illuminating connections being found among the participating researchers' interests. These connections are examples of sub-disciplinary co-constructions of knowledge that this type of dialogue facilitates (see Choi & Richards, 2017).

Engaging others through podcasts

Finally, podcasts have several professional development benefits for listeners. Podcasts can primarily be beneficial in addressing gaps in professional knowledge, providing short overviews of topics which may spark new teacher interests, and lead them to areas they had not previously considered relevant to their practice. The accessibility, familiarity, and regularity of podcast recordings make them a sustainable platform for providing stimulating introductions to areas of research which may lead to more extensive investigation by teachers in the future.

In addition, although there is no direct dialogue between podcasters and their audience immediately, various forms of subsequent engagement still occur. First, listeners may not simply be listening passively to discussions, but formulating their own perspectives on the various topics and, ideally, being inspired to pursue new areas of inquiry. As an example of this type of engagement being encouraged, educators on university-level TESOL courses have recommended ELT podcasts to their students, as well as encouraging them to engage in podcasts as collaborative learning activities. At the University of South Wales, for example, *The TEFLology Podcast* is considered an accessible resource, with BA English with TESOL students offered it as a reference material for their dissertations (M. Chick, personal communication, August 6, 2019).

Listeners are also encouraged to share their own reflections on what they have heard with podcast producers, which often takes place through online communities of practitioners, such as Twitter. One listener wrote detailed blog posts about our episodes, showing clearly how he processed and critically assessed the ideas presented (see Swagman, 2016). We have also had fruitful discussions with listeners over social media that have introduced new perspectives on content discussed, leading to the development of new insights all around.

Conclusion

We have explored how podcasting can bring about opportunities for reflective engagement with research, and between researchers in the field of ELT. In producing podcasts, research is informally shared, with discussions and reflections on content being negotiated and constructed with supportive peers. Audio recordings can then be used as an apparatus for knowledge bridging across the ELT community, connecting with an audience of practitioners for whom more traditional academic resources may have less resonance. Podcasting, given its public and communicative nature, has been discussed with regard to how dialogue with and between researchers can be facilitated. Podcasts create spaces in which researchers can discuss their work and where interviewers can ask questions and deepen their own understandings. They can also promote initiatives for encouraging scholars from across the field to engage with one another's ideas for the benefit of themselves and a wider audience.

Although the number of independent podcasts made by and for practising English language teachers in the community has been increasing over the past five years, there have been few studies into their effectiveness as a CPD tool for both producers and listeners. We therefore hope to continue to raise awareness of podcasting's role in encouraging CPD and engagement with research in ELT.

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