

TESOL Talk from Nottingham: Using Podcasts to Develop Criticality Amongst Postgraduate TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) Students

Project Leaders: Dr Jane Evison and Dr Richard Pemberton,
School of Education

Project Outline

Podcasting, the automatic transfer of audio or video files from a server to a client, is being used increasingly in Higher Education as mobile learning gains popularity. This audio podcasting project, which aims to promote postgraduate students' critical engagement with theory and research, is one of two linked CIL sub-projects designed to enhance the learning experience of students on the MA TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) course at the University of Nottingham. Both these sub-projects (the other focuses on online self-reflection) had their genesis in two separate projects which were part of the School of Education's ePioneers initiative. This CIL project has facilitated a more integrated approach to the development of critical thinking skills amongst our students. The podcast sub-project, which is known as 'TESOL Talk from Nottingham' (or TTFN), has allowed us to continue the production and transcription of podcasts which are freely available at <http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/tfn>, and to integrate these podcasts into our teaching.

Introduction

One of the aspects of our students' learning that we foreground is critical engagement with the theoretical constructs and research which underpin the TESOL field. We feel that this critical engagement needs to be fostered from the beginning of the programme. In

the autumn semester the students attend three compulsory modules: Applied Linguistics for TESOL, The Language Learner and Language Learning, and Developments in TESOL Methodology. Although students are encouraged to draw on their own language learning and teaching experiences as a way into the theoretical aspects of the topics (through learner diaries and structured evaluation of their own practice, for example), it is also important that their academic engagement with theory is developed.

This kind of engagement can be difficult for students, and as a result there is a tendency for them to position themselves as 'novices' unable to respond critically to what they perceive as the knowledge of 'experts' in the field. Nevertheless, the School of Education quite rightly promotes criticality as a key achievement of its students, and as tutors we see the development of criticality as a key part of students' developing academic profiles. In 2007 the School of Education introduced new marking criteria which included specific reference to criticality. This focus on criticality at merit and distinction levels is exemplified by this extract from the micro-criteria relating to knowledge and understanding at masters level:

	DISTINCTION	MERIT	PASS
Analysis, reflection and criticality	Demonstrates ability to analyse and critique theory , research and accounts of practice	Shows evidence of strong analytical ability; able to critique research and practice	Demonstrates some evidence of analytical ability and capacity for reflection

Integrative Learning Rationale

In order to approach criticality in such a way that its development was integral to the teaching of the MA TESOL programme, not just its assessment, we focused on embedding the podcasts originally created as part of our ePioneers project more fully into the architecture of our MA TESOL programme. We have been able to do this because, as part of our programme, we encourage our students to form out-of-class informal study groups or 'learning circles'. These learning circles are an integral part of our programme, with three different circles being formed in week one of the autumn semester, each functioning as a forum for out-of-class activities relating to one of our three core modules.

The podcasts are not the subject of every learning circle meeting, but they are one of the alternative sources of input alongside academic articles, practical tasks and student-selected topics for discussion. In the case of podcasts, students listen to the podcast individually before the group meets to discuss their responses to the tasks set. It is the summary of these discussions that is posted to the module blog by the secretary. Example tasks can be found in Appendix 1, and they show that some kind of individual preparation is required before learning circles meet to discuss as a group.

The aims of these learning circles are to help students:

- clarify and further develop their understanding of course content;
- develop their ability to reflect and think critically;
- share experience with classmates (especially with those from different backgrounds);
- learn in a collaborative and supportive environment.

Whilst there is a tendency for proponents of the use of Web 2.0 technologies in formal learning to set up online environments in opposition to face-to-face ones, with the latter being associated with the traditional views and practices of the establishment and its desire to 'constrain and contain', and the former with 'collaborative, volatile and challenging' nature of the web (Hemmi, et al., 2009: 19), we take a more integrative approach in which we hope in-class and out-of-class encounters (both face-to-face and online) will be connected by an interweaving thread of developing reflection and criticality.

Methodology

This project has been informed by a number of interconnecting theoretical perspectives:

a) Conceptualising podcast discourse

A large proportion of podcasts in Higher Education are not produced primarily with broadcasting in mind – more often than not they are 'opportunistic' recordings of face-to-face academic encounters such as lectures, which are then made available via virtual learning environments, often for revision purposes. However, our podcasts were specially

made without a 'real' audience being present, but with a 'virtual' one in mind. It was important to us that our MA TESOL students did not receive the podcasts as 'extra lectures' but understood them as dynamic academic events of which they themselves were a crucial part. The understanding of podcast discourse draws on Goffman's (1981) concept of the 'participation framework'. A participation framework rejects simplistic dyadic models of talk based on the alternating roles of speaker and listener in favour of a more dynamic framework which is able to accommodate both the podcasters 'in the studio' and the audience, who are not passive eavesdroppers, but are ratified overhearers who co-construct the podcast event.

b) Scaffolding and integrating out-of-class learning in a safe environment

The integration of Web 2.0 technologies into Higher Education requires careful consideration in order to provide a safe environment in which participants can express themselves, and comment on the views and experiences of others. However, face-to-face out-of-class encounters, such as our learning circles, also require careful handling. For this reason, we have adopted the kind of responsive and dynamic approach suggested by Kerawalla et al. (2009: 41) as appropriate for blogging in particular, to our learning circles too because of the importance of 'sensitizing the students to the decisions they may need to make' rather than dictating in advance the kinds of behaviours we expect (for example, we do not specify how learning circle meetings should be structured or provide models of blog postings).

c) Understanding an evolving discourse community

Swales' (1990) work on academic discourse communities is relevant to this podcasting project because it highlights how students are apprenticed into the discourse norms of the academic community to which they seek membership. This model, which is largely concerned with academic writing, suggests that these discourse norms are for the most part already established and are associated with the generic conventions of the discipline (e.g. how to write research articles or academic essays). In our case, however, we were using new technologies (podcasts and blogs) which did not have established discourse practices associated with them. This suggested that discourse norms would not be fixed, but would evolve throughout the programme. In this respect, we were keen to facilitate the evolution of a dynamic podcast community which would have some of the spontaneous and responsive nature of Lave and Wenger's Communities of Practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998).

Implementation

We addressed the three methodological areas in our development of the podcasts, and their integration into our teaching:

a) Producing accessible and appropriate podcast discourse

All our podcasts, 21 so far, and usually between 20 and 30 minutes long, have at least two people interacting, and involve conversations and interviews on TESOL-related topics. See Figures 1 and 2 below for examples of how the podcasts are made available on the TTFN site.



Figure 1 Screenshot of one of the podcasts on the TTFN site

<RP> OK, everybody, welcome again to TESOL Talk from Nottingham. I'm here with Jane as usual, and this time we're joined by Professor Colin Harrison ...from the School of Education. And, Colin, you're an expert in reading and literacy, ...am I correct?

<CH> Er [*<RP> laughs*], on a good day, definitely.

<RP> Glad, to have you with us. So, er, Colin we wanted to ask you a little bit about some of the, um, you know, current approaches to, er, teaching reading especially in the UK. But we, we wondered if we could kick off, if you could tell us a little bit about some of your own history: how you came, er, to, to be interested in the teaching of reading, development of reading.

Figure 2 Excerpt of a podcast transcript on the TTFN site

Although we do prepare in advance and agree some key points to cover, the podcasts are not scripted and are not edited for content. Guest interviewees are given the opportunity to listen to the podcast before it is uploaded to the web. This gives them the chance to say that they do not want it to be used at all, or to have parts edited out if they so wish. So far, neither of these things has ever happened. As the 'hosts' of the podcasts, the two tutors have the greatest responsibility for the discourse, working hard to make key points clear, reformulating what they feel might be rather complicated, and pointing out to the audience where further information may be found. All our podcasts are transcribed by a professional transcriber who has worked closely with us to produce the level of detail we feel is useful for our students, so we are able to offer this important support to the audio itself.

a) Scaffolding and integrating out-of-class learning in a safe environment

In order to give easy access to the podcasts, students have their own dedicated website which is hosted through the Learning Sciences Research Institute (LSRI) and can be reached through the easy-to-remember <http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/tfn> url. It is unfortunate that any listeners to the podcasts cannot comment about them on this site, but we do not allow this because we cannot police these comments to stop unwanted ones being posted, and we cannot easily prevent the site from being spammed. However, and more importantly pedagogically, we want our students to be able to respond to the podcasts (and to other aspects of their programme) in a structured, supportive and safe environment, and so for this reason we need an alternative virtual space - our three course blogs. See Figures 3 and 4 overleaf for examples of responses to one of the podcasts on one of the blogs.

FRIDAY, 16 OCTOBER 2009

Lexis and Grammar Podcast Comments- Week 3

Group members are: [REDACTED]

Listening to the podcast entitled "Grammar and lexis". We honestly thought it would be a battle of the two! Ranging from topics such as which is more governing? To which has more history? Yet we found the discussion to be very co-operative, descriptive and complementary. We realise as academics how important each aspect is to language. How we cannot exclude one or the other in our teaching and our daily lives. Based on what we heard and our further discussions, it seems that Richard and Jane share equal views in which neither vocabulary nor grammar should be left out within EFL/ESL classroom. It is, however, debatable that precisely how far, both vocabulary and grammar should be focused on and taught.

- video (3)
- Vocabulary (2)
- vocabulary acquisition (2)
- wilson (1)
- word cards (1)
- word stress (1)

BLOG ARCHIVE

- ▼ 2009 (77)
 - ▶ November (20)
 - ▼ October (57)
 - Reading Wars
 - Psycholinguistics & Reading
 - How to add a label to your

Figure 3 Excerpt of Learning Circle discussion summary on one of the blogs

A said...

I like your review, thanks for interesting summary!

B said...

Thanks A, Glad you liked it! It was a very interesting way to look at our professors in a different perspective :) What are we going to find out next?

[Jane](#) said...

Glad you think this 'different perspective' of your tutors is positive. Did you see the other podcasts where we talk about our own learning experiences? That might give you a few more interesting 'nuggets'.

Figure 4 Responses to the discussion summary posted in Figure 3

c) Supporting an evolving discourse community

Although the complete set of podcasts provides a useful online self-access resource for our students (or anyone else who accesses the TTFN site), our biggest concern is to scaffold the students as they become part of the academic world at Nottingham in general, and part of the TESOL community specifically. The nature and role of the learning circles, podcasts and blogs are introduced at induction, through the module guides, and again in the seminars themselves. We place a great deal of emphasis on the integration of the face-to-face sessions, podcasts, learning circles and blogs. For this reason, learning circle tasks are carefully structured so that students know what is

expected of them in a particular time frame. The advantages of the blogs, we believe, are that there is greater sharing throughout the process, that it is easy for students (as well as tutors) to comment on the summaries of learning circle discussions, and that they are more dynamic spaces where multiple academic discourse communities can develop.

d) Timelines (see Appendix 2)

Although the podcasts are created throughout the year, there is a phase of intense activity in September when we prepare for the new cohort of students. Ideally, we aim to get all our new students invited to the three module blog in the first week of the semester, but this is not always easy to achieve because of issues such as students joining the programme late, problems with internet access, and student lack of familiarity with Web 2.0 technologies. This is why we include a hands-on computer session in week 2.

Evaluation

We are now able to draw on the ongoing experiences of the TTFN podcasts of our current students, as well as those of last year's cohort. In addition, we are also in a position to analyse the podcast discourse itself.

a) Are we producing accessible and appropriate podcast talk?

There are two ways in which we have been able to evaluate the podcast discourse. The first is through the linguistic analysis of the podcast transcriptions. Because of the level of detail of the transcriptions, we have been able to carry out both computerised analysis ('corpus analysis', e.g. McCarthy and O'Keeffe, 2010) using commercially available corpus handling software (Wordsmith Tools, version 5), in conjunction with the kind of detailed qualitative investigation associated with Conversation Analysis (e.g. Hutchby and Wooffitt, 1998) and used to great effect to analyse media discourse (e.g. O'Keeffe, 2006). Analysis of the podcast discourse has revealed the strategies used by the hosts to create both podcast and podcaster identity, particularly at the beginnings and ends of the podcasts. The second source of evaluation is through student feedback. A detailed open-ended questionnaire was completed by students from the 2009 cohort (see Appendix 3), and in response to questions 3 and 5 designed to elicit comment on the roles and language of the podcasters, the following key points emerged:

- **consensus about podcaster roles:** hosts, journalists (digging for information), (friendly) interviewers, colleagues rather than supervisors;
- **consensus about allowances made to the podcast audience:** key questions asked, explanations given, clear, supporting information given, 'they lead us to focus on what they want to talk about', 'when they are talking they just let the conversation flow – within perhaps a framework of what needs to be said'.

These results suggest that we have achieved our aim of producing clear and engaging academic conversations and interviews. One student summed it up thus:

'The idea of podcasting is to allow listeners 'an ear' into the conversation. Richard and Jane tend to summarise their comments regularly, which would not be the case if they were just having a general conversation between themselves.'

b) Are the podcasts helping to scaffold and integrate in-class and out-of-class learning?

Two thirds of the way through the project, we collected data on the students' podcast listening habits as part of a broader survey of learning circle activity. We were particularly interested in seeing the demands that learning circle-related activities made on students' time. At this stage of the semester, the students have listened to an average of 6 podcasts (with a minimum of 2 and maximum of 10). The results showed that of the three task-types set, those based on podcasts were the least time-demanding:

	Activity	Time spent preparing for learning circle
a	Reading an article chosen by the tutor and answering questions	Minimum 30 mins Maximum 3 hrs Average 1 – 2 hrs
b	Doing a practical task set by the tutor	Minimum 20 mins Maximum 2 hrs Average 45 mins – 1 hr
c	Listening to a podcast and answering questions set by the tutor	Minimum 10 mins Maximum 1 hr Average 30 – 45 mins

Qualitative comments from the 2008 cohort also suggested that, after the first few weeks of the semester, students' concerns about assignment deadlines (the first one is mid-November) made them less well-disposed towards learning circle tasks which required

them to do lengthy preparation. This suggests that podcasts are time-effective learning circle tasks, and may be particularly useful towards the end of the first semester.

Qualitative comments about the podcasts from the 2009 students in response to the prompt *How do you feel when you read what other students have blogged?* show a sense of engagement across a range of encounters with different people, such as:

- *'Useful as an alternative perspective to look at certain topics.'*
- *'We can compare our ideas with others, we learn or realize what we didn't completely understand through other groups' summaries.'*
- *'Sometimes you can find different ideas from mine.'*

c) Is an academic discourse community evolving in a supportive environment?

Qualitative comments from the 2009 students in response to the prompt *If you had to describe the blogs [...] to someone from another university, what would you say?* suggest that as a discourse community, these students are developing, and that the learning circles and blogs are flexible spaces that are growing with them. At this stage, it appears that the blogs are supportive environments with the potential to develop criticality. They certainly appear to foster reflection and a critical but supportive response to others' ideas:

- *'It's a space where people feel free to talk about what they learned and are interested in, or not sure, related to English teaching.'*
- *'Informative, productive and lively place where we share our ideas freely.'*
- *'It is a good way to share ideas and know more about other students. I like this way.'*
- *'They are mostly the reflections of what we learned from the TESOL course.'*
- *'The blogs are a platform for students and tutors to share opinions about what we have learnt.'*

Although students in the 2009 cohort were asked about blogging generally, not specifically about blogging summaries of learning circle discussions, several commented about the added responsibility of blogging on behalf of a group. One student summed it up by saying *'I was a bit worried and checked my summary many times because many people will read it'*, another said *'It felt like submitting an assignment'*, and a third, *'I felt nervous because there might be some spelling/grammar mistakes that I might not be*

aware of when I blogged'. In relation to blogging generally, roughly the same number of students reported being uncertain/intrigued when they first posted rather than overtly anxious, and for the most part the students reported a growing feeling of confidence and a sense of getting used to the online environment.

Future Developments

In terms of podcast generation, in addition to continuing to record tutor-hosted interviews, the next step is to support students to produce their own podcasts in the spring semester. Feedback from the current students indicates that there is interest in this approach, but that students perceive a need for appropriate scaffolding and a supportive timeline within which to work.

At this stage it is becoming increasingly important that we research our use of podcasts and blogs in more detail. Not only do we feel this on a personal level, but the literature suggests that systematic research into the pedagogic paradigms of Web 2.0 practice is vital (Ravenscroft, 2009). One important part of this would be to analyse the discourse of the blog postings more closely, particularly in order to compare blog postings which are made on behalf of a group of students (i.e. a learning circle) and postings/further comments which are not. This would give insights into different online behaviours and responsibilities that would help to find the best way to model blogging during induction.

References and Suggested Reading

- Goffman, E. (1981) *Forms of Talk*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Hemmi, A., Bayne, S. and Land, R. (2009) The Appropriation and Repurposing of Social Technologies in Higher Education. *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning*, 25, 19 – 30.
- Hutchby, I. and Wooffitt, R. (1998) *Conversation Analysis: Principles, Practices and Applications*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Kerawalla, L., Minocha, S., Kirkup, G. and Conole, G. (2009) An Empirically Grounded Framework to Guide Blogging in Higher Education. *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning*, 25, 31 – 42.
- Lave, J. and Wenger, E. (1991) *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- McCarthy, M. J. and O'Keeffe, A. (eds.) (2010) *The Routledge Handbook of Corpus Linguistics*. London: Routledge.
- O'Keeffe, A. (2006), *Investigating Media Discourse*. London: Routledge.
- Ravenscroft, A. (2009) Social Software, Web 2.0 and Learning: Status and Implications of an Evolving Paradigm. *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning*, 25, 1 – 5.
- Swales, J. (1990) *Genre analysis: English in Academic and Research settings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wenger, E. (1998) *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning and Identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wordsmith Tools, version 5. Available at:
<http://www.lexically.net/wordsmith/version5/index.html>
- Website: <http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/tfn>

Appendix 1: Example Learning Circle Tasks

Follow-up to an 'Applied Linguistics for TESOL' seminar on grammar, and preparation for the next one on vocabulary

Listen to the podcast **Grammar and Lexis** and then, in your learning circles, compare your individual answers to this question:

Why do you think Richard is a 'vocabulary' person and Jane a 'grammar' person?

Post a summary of your discussion on the Applied Linguistics for TESOL blog

Preparation for a 'Developments in TESOL Methodology' seminar on learner-centred approaches

Listen to a podcast on Humanistic Approaches (Jane and Richard talk to Barbara Sinclair)

Discuss your reactions to what they say with your learning circle

Blog a summary of your discussion

Appendix 2: Our Podcasting Timelines

September - January	Ongoing throughout the year
<p>Pre-semester</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Design new podcast tasks/improve old tasks based on student feedback; - Create new blog sites for three core modules at http://www.blogger.com/; - Pre-course induction meeting: students are introduced to the podcasts and the blogs. <p>During semester</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - First week of semester: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Invite new cohort of students to join each blog site. - Second week of semester: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Run a session in the computer room to get everyone invited and demonstrate how the site works. - Second week of semester onwards: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Students post to the blogs in response to learning circle tasks, students and tutors comment on the posts; o Posts and comments are integrated into face-to-face seminars. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Invite guests to record podcasts with us; - Commission transcription of the audio, check the transcription, convert to pdf file; - Upload audio file and pdf file to http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/tfn (with introduction and links to relevant websites); - Check audio files and links regularly.

Appendix 3: Questionnaire

Open-ended questions

PODCASTS

1. When you have to listen to the podcasts for learning circle tasks, what procedure do you follow? (e.g. Do you listen individually? How many times do you listen? Do you listen as a group? Do you take notes? Do you read the transcript?)
2. If you had to explain what the TTFN podcasts are to someone from another university, what would you say?
3. In what ways are Richard and Jane's roles in the podcasts the same as or different from their roles in class? In what ways do their roles change (or not change) if they have a guest with them for a podcast?
4. How is the language of the podcasts similar to or different from the language used in class?
5. Do you think that Richard and Jane think about **you** when they're podcasting? [Give reasons]

BLOGS

6. If you had to describe the blogs that we use for Applied Linguistics for TESOL, Developments in TESOL Methodology and The Language Learner and Language Learning to someone from another university, what would you say?
7. How did you feel the first time you posted to any of the module blogs?
8. How do you feel now about posting to the blogs?
9. How do you feel when you read what other students have blogged?

PODCASTING AND BLOGS: THE FUTURE

10. Would you like to listen to student TTFN podcasts? If so, what kind of student podcasts would you like to listen to? What roles would people have?
11. What do you think the benefits and challenges of making your own TTFN podcasts with some of your classmates would be?
12. Is there anything else you'd like to say about the podcasts or the blogs which would be useful for us in the future?