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'Self-actualization' and Language Learning: Podcasts as Engaging Teaching Materials

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Abstract: Engaging lesson content lays the foundation for effective language learning. Therefore, providing the materials that talk about a specific topic of interest of a student and resonate with him/her on a deeper level, will positively motivate them to learn. According to Abraham Maslow, apart from the four basic needs that must be met first (the need for food, safety, love and self-esteem), people also strive for self-actualization. In light of this, the aim of our paper is to show how podcasts, having the potential to encourage personal fulfilment and self-expression, may be used as motivating teaching material for improving language skills in a fun and informative way.

Keywords: language learning, motivation, self-actualization, podcasts, teaching materials

1. Introduction

Podcasts are not "fashioned for the specific purpose of teaching a language" (Collie and Slater 1987, 6). However, similar to literature, they might be considered as a valuable authentic material "which is 'important' in the sense that it says something about fundamental human issues" (Collie and Slater 1987, 6) and "incorporate a great deal of cultural information" (Collie and Slater 1987, 6). In the last few decades, innovative teaching methods, which include unique teaching resources, have been developing. As Collie and Slater claim:

> Recent course materials have quite rightly incorporated many 'authentic' samples of language – for example, travel timetables, city plans, forms, pamphlets, cartoons, advertisements, newspaper or magazine articles. Learners are thus exposed to language that is as genuine and undistorted as can be managed in the classroom context (Collie and Slater 1987, 6).

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The aim of this paper is to show how podcasts, having the potential to encourage students' self-realization, are beneficial in the language learning process. They can support students learning because they offer a broader range of interests and enable developing various activities in the classroom. In our analysis, we rely on the theoretical views on theory of human motivation by Abraham Maslow and Joanne Collie and Stephen Slater's views on the "authentic" materials. We will also discuss the positive and negative results in using podcasts in higher education presented in the paper "Past, Present and Future of Podcasting in Higher Education". The focal attention in the paper is given to the findings of the survey on the role of self-actualization and podcasts in language acquisition, which has been carried out at Faculty of Foreign Languages recently.

2. Theoretical Framework

Self-actualization has been defined as "a person's desire to use all their abilities to achieve and be everything that they possibly can" (Cambridge Dictionary). In psychology, it is the concept refers to "the process by which an individual reaches his or her full potential" (Britannica). Although a physician Kurt Goldstein was the one who had introduced the concept, it was popularized by a psychologist Abraham H. Maslow. Self-actualization plays an important role in his theory of human motivation.

At the beginning of his critical essay "A Theory of Human Motivation", A. H. Maslow summarizes his view on motivation, by presenting thirteen propositions. He stresses "the integrated wholeness of the organism", and rejects "the hunger drive (or any other physiological drive)" as a "model for a definitive theory of motivation" and emphasises both "conscious motivations" and "the more basic, unconscious goals" (Maslow 1943, 2). The scholar also claims that "an act has more than one motivation" (Maslow 1943, 3) and that all organismic states are to be understood "as motivated and as motivating" (Maslow 1943, 3). One of the most important propositions is that human needs are organized in hierarchies of pre-potency and that "the appearance of one need usually rests on the prior satisfaction of another more pre-potent need" (Maslow 1943, 3). In his view, it is difficult to make any classification of motivation, since the theory of motivation should be "based upon goals rather than upon instigating drives or motivated behaviour" (Maslow 1943, 3). He also claims that motivation theory should be "human-centered rather than animal-centered" (Maslow 1943, 3) and that "the field in which organism reacts must be taken into account" (Maslow 1943, 3). "The possibility of isolated, specific, partial or segmented reactions" should also be taken into account and it should be understood that "the motivations are only one class of determinants of behaviour" (Maslow 1943, 3).

Maslow claims that lower, "pre-potent" needs (for example, food, among other "physiological" needs) must be gratified first. The body's need for nourishment is superior to "higher" needs such as love and belonging, according to the scholar: "A person who is lacking food, safety, love and esteem would most probably hunger for food more strongly than for anything else" (Maslow 1943, 5). As Maslow claims:

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"For the man who is extremely and dangerously hungry, no other interests exist but food. He dreams food, he remembers food, he thinks about food, he emotes only about food, he perceives only food and he wants only food" (Maslow 1943, 5). The next level of needs is related to safety. According to Maslow, the child's need for safety refers to his/her preference for an undisrupted routine and orderly world: "For instance, injustice, unfairness, or inconsistency in the parents seems to make a child feel anxious and unsafe" (Maslow 1943, 7). When it comes to the adults, the expression of safety needs can be seen in "the common preference for a job with tenure and protection, the desire for a savings account, and for insurance of various kinds (medical, dental, unemployment, disability, old age)" (Maslow 1943, 7). Love needs are next in the hierarchy. It refers to a hunger for "affectionate relations" in a family and among friends and a peer group, with a sweetheart or a spouse" (Maslow 1943, 9). It is interesting that Maslow claims that "in our society the thwarting of these needs is the most commonly found core in cases of maladjustment and more severe psychopathology" (Maslow 1943, 9). Esteem needs are in the fourth place of the hierarchy of needs. Self-respect, self-worth and the esteem of others can be included here. Maslow claims that these needs may be organized into two groups:
These are, first, the desire for strength, for achievement, for adequacy, for confidence in the face of the world, and for independence and freedom. Secondly, we have what we may call the desire for reputation or prestige (defining it as respect or esteem from other people), recognition, attention, importance or appreciation (Maslow 1943, 10).

Self-actualization is on the highest place in the hierarchy. Maslow claims that to be truly happy, everybody needs to express his/her tendencies and talents:
Even if all these needs are satisfied, we may still often (if not always) expect that a new discontent and restlessness will soon develop, unless the individual is doing what he is fitted for. A musician must make music, an artist must paint, a poet must write, if he is to be ultimately happy. What a man *can* be, he *must* be. This need we may call self-actualization (Maslow 1943, 10).

In Maslow's theory, developing and actualizing your fullest capacities has been presented as a major goal and a motivational factor of a healthy man. He claimed that "intrinsic motivation is clearly superior to extrinsic" and that "no matter what extrinsic rewards are present or absent, we will strive for self-esteem and fulfilment" (Brown 2000, 156). We are "ultimately motivated to achieve 'self-actualization' once the basic physical, safety and community needs are met" (Brown 2000, 156).

The mentioned views on self-actualization might be applied in teaching and they might help students to learn more effectively. They might also help teachers to select engaging texts for studying. As Stephen Krashen asserts in his article "The Pleasure Hypothesis", "those activities that are good for language acquisition are usually perceived by acquirers as pleasant, while those activities that are not good for language acquisition are not consistently perceived as pleasant, and are, in fact, often perceived to be painful" (Krashen 1994, 299). If the teaching resources are relevant to the students' lives, it will help them to overcome "affective barriers". Podcasts about

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the topics which are fascinating for the learner influence in a positive way his/her "affective filter" and prevent negative attitudes and emotions that impede the ability to learn. If the students learn from the materials that put them at ease, stimulate their creative thinking and uplift their mood, they might be less inhibited. As Stephen Krashen argues: "…the self-confident or secure person will be more able to encourage intake and will have a lower filter" (Krashen 2002, 23).

When it comes to the criteria of suitability of the teaching materials, Collie and Slater claim that "It is important to choose books, therefore, which are relevant to the life experiences, emotions, or dreams of the learner" (Collie and Slater 1987, 8). If the learners are actively engaged in the lesson, they are more likely to achieve learning objectives. As our analysis will reveal, students are also interested in using more podcasts focused on topics they are passionate about to enhance their language learning in the future.

In case it is not possible for a student to visit a country where English language is spoken as a mother tongue, "more indirect routes" should be presented, so that he/she gains "an understanding of the way of life of the country: radio programmes, films or videos, newspapers, and, last but not least, literary works" (Collie and Slater 1987, 6). We can also add the podcasts to the list. Similar to the mentioned materials, they also offer "a full and vivid context in which characters from many social backgrounds can be depicted," which can quickly give the foreign subscriber "a feel for the codes and preoccupations that structure a real society" (Collie and Slater 1987, 6).

The "authentic" materials present different ways of consuming information and they expand the notion of "text". Similar to reading literary works, listening to the podcasts enable learners "to shift the focus of their attention beyond the more mechanical aspects of the foreign language system" (Collie and Slater 1987, 7). As Collie and Slater claim: "Core language teaching materials must concentrate on how a language operates both as a rule-based system and as a socio-semantic system. Very often, the process of learning is essentially analytic, piecemeal, and, at the level of the personality, fairly superficial" (Collie and Slater 1987, 7). Using podcasts as a teaching resource might make contributions to different aspects of second language competence, and with that "tool" in learning "the classroom may serve as an 'intake' informal environment as well as a formal linguistic environment" (Krashen 2002, 47). According to Fernandez, Sallan and Simo, the most significant advantage of podcasting is "the capability to be used anytime anywhere" (Fernandez, Sallan & Simo 2015, 306-307). In their paper "Past, Present, and Future of Podcasting in Higher Education", they assert that "the study of podcasting in higher education remains in its initial phase of study", although podcasting has become "a major phenomenon within both our society and our educational system" (Fernandez, Sallan & Simo 2015, 305). Apart from elaborating on the results of various researchers on the podcasts, the authors have discussed the phases in the design, editing and distribution of a podcast in higher education.

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Fernandez, Sallan and Simo have recognized traditional podcasts, enhanced podcasts and video podcasts as the new types of podcasts. They have detected three distinct ways in which the podcasts might be applied in higher education:
"Nowadays, existing literature has identified three academic uses of podcasting (Donnelly and Berge 2006), which are to disseminate course content, to capture live classroom material, and to enhance studying" (Fernandez, Sallan and Simo 2015, 307).

They have mentioned the universities where podcasting has been implemented at institutional level:

> From 2002, Georgia College and State University have been introducing podcasting in some courses to include audio material. In 2004, Duke University distributed MP3 players to its 1,650 first-year students, preloaded with orientation information. Moreover, the servers of Duke University offer administrative and academic materials in digital format via iTunesU. Later, in 2005, Drexel distributed MP3 players with photo capabilities to its students in their first academic year. Other universities that have implemented podcasting at an institutional level are University of California, Berkeley, Princeton University, and Stanford University. (Fernandez, Sallan and Simo 2015, 307).

Fernandez, Sallan and Simo have investigated the scientific literature on the efficiency of podcasts within the educational community. They have emphasized the findings of Heilesen, who lists "the three most common ways that authors have evaluated the effects of podcasting on the learning processes of students" (Fernandez, Sallan and Simo 2015, 308). Those are: 1. questionnaires, work groups, and individual interviews; 2. evaluating access to materials or assessing the outcome of students in the course and 3. controlled experiments in predesigned learning situations (Fernandez, Sallan and Simo 2015, 308). It is interesting that Heilesen groups the results of his literature review into two categories – "studies that suggest that the use of podcasts has no effect on the learning process (or the results are inconclusive) and studies that propose that podcasting has positive effects" (Fernandez, Sallan and Simo 2015, 308).

The authors have found a long list of researchers and scholars who are skeptical of podcasting. Some scholars have noticed that podcasting does not facilitate the process of learning or does not make a difference in the classroom:

> The results of Deal (2007) also showed that podcasts based merely on the spread of attendance sessions do not demonstrate a significant utility in the learning process. These results coincide with conclusions made by Lazzari (2009), who observed that the distribution of material through podcasts to part-time students does not affect their learning and that the use of podcasting as a learning support tool is therefore pedagogically neutral. McKinney et al. (2009) found that the use of podcasting only helped student learning if they took notes and listened to the podcasts multiple times. (Fernandez, Sallan and Simo 2015, 310).

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The disadvantages of various kinds have been identified: “Campbell (2005) and Fernandez (2007) suggested that the increase in Web classes via podcasting could provoke a massive decline in attendance in face-to-face classes by students” (Fernandez, Sallan and Simo 2015, 310). Furthermore, it was also discovered that the use of podcasts negatively affected “the attention levels of students” and that podcasting is associated with “passive learning” (Fernandez, Sallan and Simo 2015, 310-311).

However, the authors of the article “Past, Present, and Future of Podcasting in Higher Education” have also found the authors who consider their experiences with podcasting succesful. The particular surveys have demonstrated that podcasts can be of benefit in a classroom setting:

> For example, Kurtz, Fenwick, and Ellsworth (2007) observed higher scores in their students’ final projects after the use of podcasting. Lazzari (2009) found that full-time students’ involvement in the development of podcast lessons effectively improved their learning experiences. Similar results were obtained by Smith et al. (2005). The results of Evans (2008) suggest that students prefer podcasts before consulting such traditional materials as textbooks or classroom sessions. Likewise, these students also suggested that podcasts were the most appropriate tools for reviewing content throughout the course, being favored over other more traditional materials and even their own notes. Brittain et al. (2006) present the same results, concluding that podcasts are a better tool for reviewing (not for initial studying) course content than are textbooks (Fernandez, Sallan and Simo 2015, 311).

Some authors have shown that using podcasting has additional benefits: „According to Lee and Chan (2007), podcasting can significantly reduce feelings of loneliness when studying, increasing the sense of belonging to a group or community of students” (Fernandez, Sallan and Simo 2015, 311). Lazzari claims that “podcasts created, edited, and delivered by students can be a form of developing teamwork, promoting collaboration, creating and structuring (through roles) group work, and developing a social network within a course.

Confirming the studies mentioned above, our survey has shown that the use of podcasts is received by students in a satisfactory manner.

3. Findings of the Survey

The purpose of our survey was to gather students’ thoughts and insights related to the term ‘self-actualization’ and the use of podcasts in English language learning in order to collect the data necessary to guide us in process of designing engaging language learning materials around podcasts. Our questionnaire included 12 questions and 21 respondents – students of the bachelor studies at the Faculty of Foreign Languages, Alfa BK University, in Belgrade. The survey was carried out in March 2025. Given the number of participants, the results may not be representative of the broader population, but may be helpful in the process of designing engaging ELT materials. The compiled answers are discussed below.

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1. *How would you define 'self-actualization' in your own words?*

In the answers to this question, most students gave similar definitions, which show that they understand the meaning of the term in general:

> I would define it as working on yourself and constantly finding ways to self-improve; Self-actualization is a tendency to give your best and reach your full potential in doing something; Using your talents and potentials, working on yourself and turning these talents into something useful and productive; Becoming the best version of myself.

Only one student didn't give any explanation, which means that still there are some students that are not familiar with this concept, and teachers should have that in mind.

2. *What is in your opinion the best way to attain self-actualization?*
   - *Regular education*
   - *Personal development courses*
   - *Self-studying*
   - *Other*

The answers to this question showed that 35% of students believe that all the three aspects *Regular education, Personal development courses* and *Self studying* are equally important for self-actualization, 30% of students believe that combination of *Regular education* and *Self-studying* are the most important, 25% think that those are *Personal development courses* and *Self-studying*, while only 5% believe that *Regular education* is a key for self-actualization. One student offered the following explanation:

> I think it is impossible to achieve self-actualization without combining all 3 methods that you mentioned above. If we focus only on one of them, we would always lack benefits of the other methods. It also depends on the personality, because each method can have greater or smaller impact on the individual;

while, one student highlighted that '*maintaining healthy life style and being happy'* are also important for self-actualization.

These answers reveal that students are aware that self-actualization is a complex process and that individuals may develop it only through simultaneous work on self-improvement in different contexts.

3. How often do you listen to podcasts for personal development purposes?

In English:	*Daily*	*Weekly*	*Occasionally*	*Rarely*	*Never*
In Serbian:	*Daily*	*Weekly*	*Occasionally*	*Rarely*	*Never*

The results show that most of the students rarely (38,09%) or occasionally (23,80%) listen to podcasts in English for self-development purposes. Besides, 9,52 % of students claimed that they never listen to podcasts in English for this purpose. However, 19,04% of students listen to it weekly and 9,52% daily. Podcasts in Serbian

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are even less frequently used: 28,57% of students never use them, 38,09% do it rarely and 28,57% occasionally. Only 4,76% claim they listen to podcasts in Serbian for self-development purposes weekly.

The results indicate that students listen to podcasts in English more that in Serbian, but only 9,52% listen to podcasts for self-development purposes daily. These data bring us to the conclusion that the use of podcasts in ELT would mean the implementation of one of their free-time activities in language learning process, but teachers would have to motivate students to listen to podcasts more.

4. What format of podcast do you prefer for learning new topics?

- *Interviews with experts*
- *Storytelling or narrative podcasts*
- *Educational discussions or debates*
- *Case studies or real-life examples*
- *Solo commentary or advice from hosts*
- *Other*

Survey results show that 28% of students prefer *Storytelling or narrative podcasts* for learning new topics, 24% prefer Interviews with experts, 20% *Educational discussions or debates*, 18% *Case-studies or real-life examples* and 10% like *Solo commentary* or *advice from hosts*. Besides, some students pointed out that they prefer some other topics, such as *Murder mystery podcast*, *Science*, *Documentary podcasts* and *Simple discussions between people*.

As it was expected, the answers bring us to the conclusion that there is the whole range of students' preferences in terms of formats of podcasts for learning new topics.

5. Which podcast topics would you be interested in exploring if they were offered in a student-focused podcast series?

- *Study strategies and learning techniques*
- *Career exploration and job market trends*
- *Sustainable living and environmental awareness*
- *Diversity, equity, and inclusion*
- *Global cultures and languages*
- *Digital tools and apps for students*
- *Other*

According to the answers to this question, podcast topics students would be interested in exploring in the future are: *Career exploration and job market trends* (22,41 %), *Study strategies and learning techniques* (18,96%), *Global cultures and languages* (18,96%), *Sustainable living and environmental awareness* (13,79%), *Digital tools and apps for students* (10,05%), *Diversity, equity, and inclusion* (8,62%) and some other topics (1,72%). The other topics they would like to learn more about are: *Health and importance of physical activity, Sports and recreation, Communication and*

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relationships, Business, Travel, Healthy living, Finances, Pop culture and entertainment.

The answers indicate that students' interests are various and that the choice of podcasts in ELT should be adopted to their needs and preferences.

6. How often do you listen to podcasts as part of your English language learning process?

Daily Weekly Occasionally Rarely Never

The answers to this question show that 33,33% of students rarely listen to podcasts as part of their English language learning process. 28,57% of students reported that they listen to it occasionally, and 14,28% never. However, 14,28% of students listen to podcasts as part of their English language learning process weekly and 9,52 % daily.

These results indicate that students should be encouraged by teachers to listen to podcasts more in the process of English language learning.

7. What is the primary reason for using podcasts in language learning process?

- *To improve listening skills*
- *To practice pronunciation*
- *To expose myself to authentic language use*
- *To learn new vocabulary and phrases*
- *To stay motivated and entertained while learning*
- *Other*

Based on the data obtained we can conclude that most students – 27,86% think that primary reason for using podcasts in language learning process is learning new vocabulary and phrases. 24% of students believe that primary reason is improving listening skills, 18,03 % think it is to help students stay motivated and entertained while learning, 16,39% believe that the main purpose of using podcasts in language learning process is pronunciation practice, while 13,11% stresses the importance of exposure to authentic language use.

These answers indicate that students believe that using podcasts would be beneficial for various reasons, which may make podcasts a potentially efficient language learning tool.

8. How do podcasts compare to other language learning tools (e.g., apps, textbooks, language exchanges) in terms of effectiveness and enjoyment?

More effective and enjoyable Equally effective and enjoyable
Less effective and enjoyable Not sure

The results show that 38,08% of students assume that podcasts are equally effective as the other language learning tools, 28% think that they are more effective and 4,76% find that they are less effective. Finally, 28,57% of students were not sure about how to assess podcasts in comparison to the other language learning tools.

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The results reveal that most students believe that podcasts are equally or more effective language learning tool than the other ones, which makes them suitable for potential use in the language learning.

9.To what degree do you think language learning through podcasts promotes critical thinking or self-reflection?

Very high degree High degree Moderate degree Low degree No degree at all

The answers related to the degree of potential of podcasts in developing critical thinking or self-reflection, show that 52,38% of students believe that podcasts have moderate potential to develop these kills, 38,09% think that podcasts have high potential, while equal number of students 4,76% assume that their potential is very high or low.

The results reveal that majority of students believe that podcasts would be useful for developing critical thinking and self-reflection, which makes them suitable for the use in the language learning.

10. Would you be interested in using more podcasts focused on topics you're passionate about to enhance your language learning in the future?

Yes No Not sure

85, 71% of students stated that they would be interested in using more podcasts focused on topics they are passionate about to enhance their language learning in the future. Only 9,52% of students holded that they wouldn't like to use podcasts for language learning, while 4,47% were not sure about their attitude towards this question.

The results indicate that majority of students would be interested in using more podcasts in language learning, which is very encouraging from the perspective of language learning materials design.

11. Do you think that using more podcasts focused on topics you're passionate about would increase your motivation for language learning?

Yes No Not sure

Similar to the previous question, most students (80,95%) stated that using more podcasts focused on topics they are passionate about would increase their motivation for language learning.The others, equal number of students (9,52%) in two groups believe that podcasts wouldn't increase their motivation or were not sure about this question.

12. Could you share your experience with using podcasts in your language learning process so far?

In the final question students were asked to share their experience with using podcasts in language learning process. Most of them wrote that podcasts are motivating and that they helped them with improving their language skills.

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> It's about gradually building my skills and confidence in speaking and writing language. It also helped in understanding words and phrases more.
> Using podcasts in language learning process helped me to improve listening skills and also helped me to learn new words, especially I was interested in, such as science, history, art and listening.

It is important to remark that even the students who don't have experience with using podcasts believe that using podcasts would be beneficial:

> I haven't tried using podcasts as language learning technique, but I think it would be very interesting.
> I don't have a lot of experience when it comes to language learning through the process of listening podcasts for learning English or other languages, but I do listen to podcasts on various topics regularly and I can say that this practice improved my listening skills and picking up new vocabulary and phrases. I found it very useful if you want to improve your communication skills also. All in all it can be beneficial and should be included as a regular exercise for everyone who wants to learn any language.

Furthermore, it is worth mentioning that one of the comments claimed that podcasts are 'too long and because of that not such a good tool for language learning'. However, it should be noted that podcasts may vary in their length, and that the length itself shouldn't be the reason for avoiding their use in language teaching.

The answers obtained in our questionnaire show that students are familiar with the concept of 'self-actualization', which is, as they see it, a very complex process requiring simultaneous work on self-development in different contexts. Besides, the answers revealed that most students listen to podcasts in their free time to learn about new topics and that podcasts in English are more popular among them than the podcasts in Serbian. Finally, the answers showed that most students believe that using podcasts would help them to improve their language skills and they would like to use them more in the language learning process in the future. All these data confirm our starting assumption that podcasts are potentially a very valuable tool in ELT which enable developing various activities in the classroom.

4. Conclusion

Striving for the fulfillment of one's personal potential is one of the popular goals among the young adults. Their interest in learning from the authentic sources that are useful for their self-realization needs to be taken into consideration by their teachers. "Pleasant" activities help students to overcome "affective barriers".

When podcasts are dealing with the topic students are passionate about they can make them more motivated and engaged in the language learning process. They provide authentic input in ELT and enable creating various activities in the classroom. Based on the theoretical insights and the data from our survey we can conclude that podcasts, having the potential to encourage personal fulfilment and self-expression, should be used in English language courses as motivating teaching material for

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improving language skills in a fun and informative way. Further research on podcasts in ELT, based on larger number of respondents and other learner groups, would help ELT teachers in the process of language learning materials design following students needs and preferences as essential for their success in language learning.

Note:
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