

## PODCASTING IN MODERN GERMAN AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE EDUCATION

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*The use of internet, which enables free access to German media at all times, has become an everyday activity. In my work I analysed German podcasts especially designed for teaching German as a foreign language, and the ways they can be applied. I wanted to find out how far didacticised podcasts can supplement learning materials to improve listening and speaking skills, and how much they are suited for individual learning. I also wanted to learn how they can be ideally applied in teaching German as a foreign language, and what advantages and possible disadvantages they may have.*

**Keywords:** language education, German language, second language education, podcasting

### Definition of goal and work methodology

The development of web 2.0 applications (such as blogs, wikis, podcasts, social networks, etc.) has changed how information and communication technologies (further: ICT) can be utilised in teaching foreign languages. Productivity, mobility, and active participation of students have gained a central role. Applying effective didactical methods, the new media and the huge amount of information can help improve receptive and productive skills.

The electronic teaching media are applied by humans, so it is always about the application that is methodically and didactically well thought about. Teachers must bear in mind the teaching and learning objectives, and the functions of the applied media in every situation. The selection of a medium obviously depends on the teacher's creativity, fantasy, and possibilities, and the demands of the students as well (Dringó-Horváth, 2011). The goal is to foster individual and autonomous learning with the help of learning materials and interaction opportunities which are independent of time and location (Dringó-Horváth, 2011).

In my paper I would like to explore how far podcasts can meet expectations of modern foreign language education as set above since they seem to be an ideal supplement to learning materials because of their topicality, authenticity, and thematic versatility.

The objective of my work is to explore the potential of podcasts in teaching German as a foreign language in detail, and support it with practical examples. My research is related to two areas:

- Individual language learning: Autonomous learning is playing a more and more important role also in learning a foreign language. The question is how podcasts can support autonomous learning.
- Foreign language teaching: Podcasts are mainly used in education at universities and colleges at the moment. There are only few materials available on utilising this new medium in secondary schools and secondary grammar schools, so I am going to examine podcasts from this aspect.

I try to examine different kinds of podcasts which may be suitable for students of different age and language level, with special emphasis on podcasts supplemented with didacticised materials, assuming that they can be meaningfully applied in the classroom. In my work I will try to highlight similarities and differences among didacticised podcasts, and show points of reference for the use of them in teaching German as a foreign language.

### The tool podcast

Podcasting means producing and offering audio files (podcasts) and video files (video podcasts) on the internet (Kluckhohn, 2009). It is a service that is provided to users mostly free of charge by publishing companies, providers, private persons. Users can access the selected media contents – reports, criticism, music, news, comedies and language courses - independently of time and location (Schmidt, Ketterl & Morisse, 2007).

Podcasts such as radio programmes can be accessed and listened to independently of the broadcast time. New episodes of radio programmes are offered all the time. Users can access the content of the programmes with the help of some mail systems to decide if they want to download them or not. Also, users can subscribe to these programmes with the help of computer programmes, so-called podcasting clients or feed readers, especially developed to for this purpose. The most popular programmes are Winamp from the company Nullsoft (Kluckhohn, 2009) and iTunes from Apple. The user does not need to make a decision regarding each episode, they can „access the full audio databank“ (Kluckhohn, 2009). If the user does not need the podcast any more, they can stop the subscription.

Searching for podcasts in iTunes is really easy. One enters the title or a search keyword in the search field, and the results are displayed in a few seconds. When a foreign language learner is looking for a podcast which suits their level, all they have to enter is „learning German“, and the search results are displayed immediately.

There is a wide range of podcasts available on the internet. WDR, ARD, DW (Deutsche Welle) and numerous other providers make current media products available on the internet in form of audio or video files to provide information. WDR offers podcasts for both their television and radio programmes. It is clear that unambiguous explanations and introductions help to use podcasts easily. Besides, podcasts are available for every age group, also for senior citizens and children. The podcasts offered by the station Deutsche Welle are well suited to be used in the classroom or for self-study.

## Reasons for and application options of the use of podcasts in foreign language education

Learning a foreign language does not only foster communication with native speakers of that foreign language, but it also facilitates an intelligent approach to foreign cultures and points of view. To learn a foreign language right and effectively is not easy.

There are plenty of modern learning materials nowadays which meet all requirements and expectations, but traditional language courses are still not sufficient in the classroom. It is necessary to find a form of learning which makes presence learning more efficient and fosters autonomous learning. This form of learning should represent the spirit of the time: it should be independent of time and location, easily accessible, and it should not represent a financial burden.

The greatest advantage of the internet in foreign language learning is that the materials available on the internet go beyond the learning material of course books, they enable mobile learning, and offer mostly free access to the materials.

For successful communication one needs an extensive vocabulary, a pragmatically right application of words and expressions, grammatically correct forms, and good pronunciation. For language learners one of the most difficult things is to understand „live language“. It is very important to improve all these areas simultaneously.

Podcasts can help to improve both productive and receptive skills. Podcasts are best suited to supplement topics that are not treated in course books sufficiently, or not at all; they can multiply the learning material, raise students' interest, they are authentic and up-to-date, which is again not typical of common learning materials (Kluckhohn, 2009). They are able to foster rapid language improvement (Kluckhohn, 2009).

### Types of podcasts for language teaching

Podcasts were initially used for entertainment purposes only, nowadays they are used in education as well, at universities, colleges and schools. They are applied both in the classroom and for self-study. You can create your own podcasts or use already created ones. The most popular types of podcasts are audio, video, and enhanced podcasts.

The podcasts above can be further classified according to their use in education. For the classroom use the most relevant podcasts are the ones, directly created to educational purposes, the didacticised and undidacticised ones.

- Big stations like ZDF, ARD and WDR make their programmes, news, and series available on their websites regularly, in form of undidacticised podcasts. They are about current issues from the most different areas, such as politics (ZDF: Berlin direkt), sports (ZDF: Das aktuelle Sportstudio) or the popular series „Wetten dass...?“ The target audience is the wide public. These podcasts are authentic, not designed for foreign language teaching. They assume good language skills because they are presented in complex and complicated grammatical structures and a high level of vocabulary use. Still, they offer learners a good chance to deal with authentic texts. Podcasts vary in length, they are normally 2-60 minutes long. It is not advisable to apply them below level B2. A major disadvantage of these podcasts

is that they do not contain any supplementary materials, so that the teacher has to create the tasks and exercises.

- Didacticised podcasts are those which have already been modified to some extent, for example those with subtitles. Podcasts directly created for learning purposes often contain abridged or simplified texts, different supplementary materials. They have a wide variety of exercises and tasks that improve both communication and writing skills, which do not only foster classroom learning but also autonomous learning. Thus, the learner is moving within the „target culture“ and deals with the topics and issues of the target culture (Reppe, 2012). One example is a podcast of DW: Slowly told news. Here, the current news are presented at a slow pace, as supplementary material students can access transcripts (frequently as pdf files).

Podcasts are often made accessible on the internet as supplementary material to printed course books. One example is DW: Deutsch Perfekt. It offers texts and exercises for vocabulary and grammar from the magazine Deutsch Perfekt Plus, partly with solutions. It is important to mention the podcast of DUDEN-Sprachberatung, which is an excellent supplement to the DUDEN dictionaries.

### Empirical research

#### Podcasts made by the station Deutsche Welle: Points of reference to select the right podcasts

One of the most typical provider of podcasts is the station Deutsche Welle that offers online audio and video podcasts didacticised for teaching German as a foreign language for every level on its website. They are adjusted to the levels of the common European reference framework. They also offer courses with different mediation languages. I am aiming to analyse these podcasts and create a list of criteria as to best apply these didacticised podcasts.

I have watched and listened to a great number of didacticised and undidacticised video and audio podcasts. Audio podcasts were partly authentic texts, partly not authentic. The reason why it is hard to classify these texts according to language levels is that they were modified. For example, understanding is made easier by more precise pronunciation, emphasising a word, or eliminating background noises (DW: Deutsch im Alltag - Alltagsdeutsch). On the other hand, these podcasts are presented at a normal speech pace, sometimes even a slight dialect is used. The podcast DW: Slowly Told News, represents another problem. Here, social, political, and economic issues are treated in the language of the news. The texts have the levels B2-C1, but they are told at a very slow pace, thus a certain discrepancy arises.

I have selected the podcasts which my analysis is based on, according to principles that are relevant both in the classroom and for self-study: the learner should get custom-made exercises which represent their level of language, age, and interests.

In my analysis I restricted myself to didacticised podcasts. When selecting the actual podcasts episodes, the most important aspects were target group, versatility of supplementary materials, and the language level. To find out which podcasts meet the requirements listed above, I kept asking the same questions during my work:

- What kind of and how much supplementary material are offered by the podcasts series?
- What is the target group?
- Which skills are improved?
- Which exercise types are suited to improve each different skill?
- What is the connection between the grammar exercises and the ones related to content?
- How can the exercises be applied in the classroom?

For the basis of my research I chose the website Deutsche Welle because these questions were easy to answer here. I have analysed the following audio podcast series in detail:

- Langsam gesprochene Nachrichten (Slowly Told News)
- Deutsche im Alltag – Alltagsdeutsch( Germans in Everyday Life – Everyday German)
- Wieso nicht? (Why not?)
- Top Thema mit Vokabeln (Top Issue with Vocabulary)
- Sprachbar: Deutsch im Fokus (Language Bar: German in Focus)
- Marktplatz (Market Place)

Video podcast:

- Jojo sucht das Glück (1. und 2. Staffel) (Jojo is looking for happiness – Seasons 1 and 2)

These audio and video podcasts are made up of several episodes, and can be subscribed to in iTunes or RSS Feed. After having subscribed to them, they will be downloaded automatically. They can be accessed free of charge.

During my analysis I examined the available supplementary materials, especially the exercises. I analysed to what extent they represent the opportunity to improve listening skills, reading skills, oral and written expression, in which social forms they can be applied best, how the skills required in language exams, namely the ability to discuss or present a topic, or to argue, are represented. I also wanted to find out how well vocabulary and grammar can be improved, and how the exercises display the intercultural approach.

The podcast series I analysed do not only provide exercise sheets but also the manuscript and a some of them glossary. The manuscript is always clearly structured, the glossary in one language.

### The aspect of target group

To be able to choose the right podcast for a target group, one has to know the typical features of this group. Thus, I have taken age, social forms, time needed, preliminary knowledge, and learning objectives into consideration.

*Age.* The podcasts I analysed can be applied mainly for students of 15-18 of age, as, on the one hand, young people of this age are already able to deal with topics like culture, society, worldview, politics, etc., on the other hand, they have the language skills that makes them able to cope with these issues. As the most podcasts that I analysed are rather complex regarding vocabulary and grammar, and understanding requires a lot of background knowledge, the teacher has to give a lot of consideration selecting the right ones.

Some of the podcasts target special age groups. The soap opera DW: Jojo sucht das Glück (Jojo is looking for happiness) is meant for young people. It shows life in a flat shared by several roommates. DW: *Langsam gesprochene Nachrichten* (*Slowly Told News*) is suitable for learners who are mature enough to understand complex contents, have sufficient vocabulary, but have little practice in listening comprehension. There are podcasts for small children and senior citizens as well.

*Social forms.* Successful application of podcasts in the classroom largely depends on the teacher's personality and the structures in the group. It is also about the learning situation which determines what social form the teacher chooses. The podcasts I analysed are equally suitable for group and pair work and also individual study. The tasks, such as discussing a topic or write a personal letter, give every course participant the opportunity to express themselves.

Exercises, such as mind maps, vocabulary games, gap filling texts, creating sentences with given words, expressions, and antonyms, cannot only be applied in group or individual work in presence learning, but also during self-study, as there is a manuscript. Since there are no solutions provided, the students are dependent on the teacher.

*Time needed.* The length of the analysed audio files is between 2 and 13 minutes. One exception is the podcast DW: Marktplatz (Market Place), here the length is 20-25 minutes.

The applicability of podcasts varies according to teaching unit and the objective of the class. They can be applied in the introduction phase, the presentation or the exercise phase. When they are applied at the end of the class, they are best suited for homework and provide a good basis for research exercises.

*Preliminary knowledge.* To be able to understand podcasts texts, one needs certain background knowledge about the culture, society, worldview, politics, etc., of the actual country.

In the framework of project work, learners can prepare for the podcast text by carrying out research on the internet looking for information. This way, even complex and problematic topics can be dealt with effectively and in a motivating way.

*Learning objectives.* The most important learning objective when applying podcasts in teaching language as a foreign language is to improve listening comprehension skills. Beyond this, working with podcasts is best suited to extend basic vocabulary, improve expression and presentation skills, improve reading skills and creative writing skills. Also, intercultural competencies can be strengthened: it is very important to make students familiar with German culture, and highlight differences between Germany and the student's native country.

### The aspect of exercise types

The exercise types of podcasts are the same as those of traditional course books. Also the structure of exercise succession is similar to that in different course books, but here, generally fewer exercises are offered, so that the teacher has to create a certain number of additional exercises. In this respect, there are huge differences among podcasts though. Some podcasts check listening comprehension with just a few multiple choice tests, others offer complex series of exercises. Playful exercises, such as DW: Wortverdreher (Baumschaden – Schaumbaden in DW: Deutsche im Alltag – Alltagsdeutsch) are rather the exception.

Typical exercises related to content:

- express opinion regarding a certain topic, give reasons, or express wishes
- discuss and ponder advantages and disadvantages
- collect information, do research, create a presentation, a report, a review, a statement, write the biography of a famous person, outline a topic
- decide if the statements regarding the information in the text are true or false
- contrastive exercises: comparison between Germany and native country

Exercise types to improve different competencies:

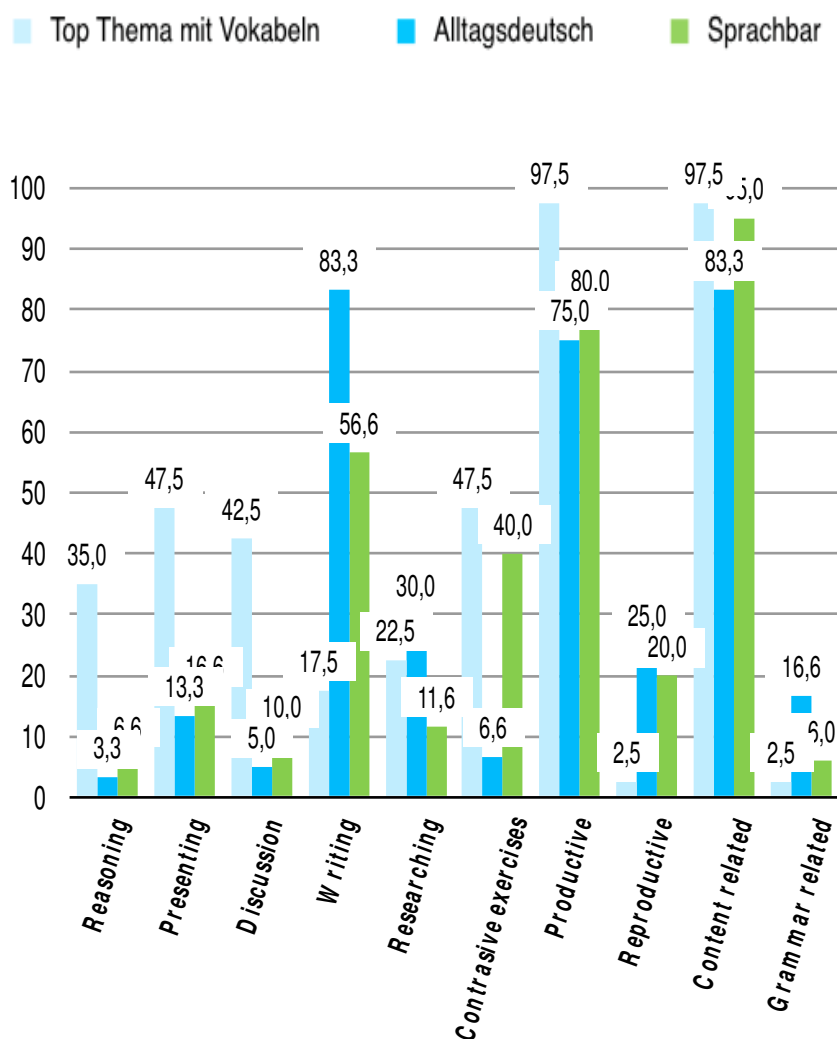
- The most important skills to be improved are listening comprehension skills. Speech pace and articulation vary according to language levels and didactical objective, photos (in video podcasts) make understanding easier. Multiple choice tests are almost always used to check listening comprehension. Only about 10 per cent of them is related to grammar. Further exercise types are gap filling texts and yes/no questions.
- To broaden basic vocabulary there are exercises like mind maps and gap filling texts where students fill in the gaps with synonyms or standard expressions. Frequently, students are asked to explain the meaning of words, set phrases, proverbs, create compound nouns, match words with their antonyms.
- To improve expression and presentation skills students are asked to give a brief or longer summary of the text.
- To improve reading skills students can do research on the internet, collecting information.
- Creative writing skills can be improved by exercises such as writing a short story related to the text, or writing a personal letter about a given topic. Students may be asked to write a newspaper article, an essay expressing their opinion, or a report about a given

topic, ponder advantages and disadvantages, or write a dialogue in a given form (e.g. in language spoken by young people).

- Writing criticism and presenting it to the class is a good way to discuss a topic, give suggestions and tips. This type of exercise improves several skills simultaneously: students have to express their views and opinions, report about a topic, ponder advantages and disadvantages.
- Intercultural awareness is fostered when students learn interactions and ways of behaving (e.g. greetings) typical of a foreign country, when they are prompted to recollect their own experiences from their native country, deal with a topic (e.g. the school system, the protection of the environment, etc.) in a contrastive way, that is, they compare the situation in Germany with that in their native country.
- Creativity is fostered by thinking about how to continue and end a story. Here, students are encouraged to continue a story or write an ending to it, or guess the contents of the next episode (DW: Jojo sucht das Glück).
- Grammar exercises are rather the minority. There are exercises focussing on creating and using different tenses, clause structures, transforming active sentences into the passive voice, or the other way round, practising dependent preposition structures, creating compound words. This choice of tasks is often supplemented by exercises aiming at improving pronunciation (repeating expressions and shorter sentences from the text) and project work.

*Representative examples for the improvement of different skills.* The following podcasts were analysed: DW: Deutsche im Alltag - Alltagsdeutsch (C1-C2), DW: Sprachbar: Deutsch im Fokus (C1-C2) and DW: Top Thema mit Vokabeln (B1). The following statistics is based on the tasks related to 241 podcasts.





All three podcasts aim at improving productive skills. The exercises are to a high extent related to content. Podcasts which aim at fostering writing skills are at the same time more focussed on grammar.

In *Deutsche im Alltag – Alltagsdeutsch*: the majority of the exercises foster creative writing (83 per cent), grammar exercises are represented with about 17 per cent. There are hardly any exercises prompting discussions and reasoning.

Tasks in *Sprachbar: Deutsch im Fokus* develop speaking skills (reasoning, presenting, discussion tasks: about 7-17 per cent) and also writing skills (57 per cent), grammar is represented in about 5 per cent of the exercises. Research exercises have a share of about 10 per cent. Around 20 per cent of the exercises aims at improving reproductive skills.

*Top Thema mit Vokabeln* focuses on skills which are also required in language exams: the ability to discuss and present different topics, reasoning. Students are prompted to do research in about 20 per cent of the tasks, which improves reading and listening comprehension skills. There are fewer writing exercises. Grammar is dealt with marginally.

*Top Thema mit Vokabeln* is a good example in what a complex way a topic can be dealt with. In every worksheet students are first asked to do a

multiple choice test. The statements and questions – five for each podcast – are mainly related to content. For every text there is task too.

### Practical application of podcasts

Podcasts offer a wide range of use. The teacher must decide how they handle them in the classroom. They have to bring them into line with the official training material, and integrate them in the learning process. However, in order to make the learning process really more efficient with the help of podcasts, teachers are required to plan, prepare, and structure the activity very thoroughly. Also, students have to be taught how to tackle podcasts. Teachers have to give students good instructions, so that they learn how to deal with podcasts. Teachers have to consider that dealing with podcasts in foreign language learning is rather new for most students (at least in Hungary).

Presence learning can be made more effective and more interesting by using podcasts. They have the potential to supplement each section of the course book optimally. One example is DW: Lasst es krachen!, which is a perfect fit for Topic 2 of the course book Sicher! Deutsch als Fremdsprache, Kursbuch, B1+. Podcasts can be linked to project tasks, and offer ideal prompts to start conversations. Students can discuss a topic, express their opinions, give a presentation, or tell other students what they have learnt from the actual episode. Through carrying out research on the internet they get familiar with „live“ language, the words learnt are recalled in new contexts, their vocabulary gets intensified, furthermore, they meet plenty of new words. Thus, podcasts can foster autonomous learning. The soap opera DW: Jojo sucht das Glück has a special place even among podcasts. Current topics and true-to-life situations appeal to students so that they can identify with the podcast characters, and they will be pleased to express their opinions to the events. It helps reduce inhibitions, students will experience joy at speaking.

All this requires teachers to have a shift in thinking. Teachers have to be in the background, „navigating“ students through the class, the initiative will be taken by the students themselves. This fosters student oriented phases which fosters openness, creativity, and courage to express themselves.

Since every podcast offers texts and exercises of different difficulty, teachers can help improve every student individually by selecting the right text and exercises, or creating tailor-made exercises.

Didacticised podcasts improve several skills simultaneously by offering different speaking exercises (reasoning, discussions, presentations): creative writing, reading comprehension, listening comprehension, speaking.

*Possible disadvantages of podcasts.* Unfortunately, most podcasts are not didacticised. Not even didacticised podcasts offer enough exercises, and there are hardly any interactive tasks. The grade of difficulty also varies a lot, so that learners are dependent on the teacher's help. To subscribe to podcasts you need internet access which a lot of students do not have. Unfortunately, some teachers lack the necessary IT skills, and their further education in this area is often insufficient.

## Summary

The world we live in has become increasingly mobile. Education has to keep up, it has to get mobile too. Life is colourful and diversified, so must be learning contents too. The demand for education that is independent of time and location is increasing, thus, new forms of education are asked for.

The internet is a treasure chamber, especially regarding learning foreign languages, as there is a huge amount of authentic reading and listening materials and videos. Many of these materials are made available in form of podcasts (audio and video files you can subscribe to).

In my paper I analysed how far didacticised podcasts are suitable for teaching German as a foreign language and for self-study. It is also true for podcasts that their application is only meaningful when it is done meaningfully. If teachers want to use them in classroom, they have to be well aware of their teaching objectives, and they have to know their students very well. During my analysis I also bore this principle in mind: for every podcasts I attempted to define language level, topic range, age of the target group, also the learning objectives regarding supplementary material.

Big stations like DW, ZDF, ARD & Co offer a lot of their programmes about everyday topics also as podcasts. This is one of the main arguments why one should work with podcasts in teaching German as a foreign language. The learner comes across “live” language, becomes familiar with the culture and the customs of the foreign country, through the multi-layered information the enjoyment of learning is growing.

For learning German in and out of school especially didacticised podcasts are suited as they can be applied as supplementary material in the classroom and as additional material to be dealt with independently.

The number of exercises offered to supplement audio and video files is rather low. If students do these exercises, they get an approximate picture of how far they managed to get familiar with the material. If teachers want to know how deeply their students understood the content of the audio or video file, they will have to create supplementary materials. The task and exercises are normally rather complex which assume several competencies. It can be said that the supplementary materials offered mainly focus on productive skills. Research tasks foster students' ability to find their way on the internet, and help make students become aware of the fact that they are learning the foreign language for themselves, not for school.

In summary, it can be said that podcasts cannot replace traditional learning materials, but with their versatility they provide an ideal supplement. They open a new horizon in teaching German as a foreign language, and they pose a challenge to both teachers and learners.

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