

Exploring University EFL Learners' Experiences in Using Podcasts for Listening and Vocabulary Development

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Abstrak

“Penelitian ini merupakan studi campuran dengan desain explanatory sequential yang bertujuan untuk mengeksplor pengalaman pembelajar EFL di tingkat universitas dalam menggunakan podcast untuk meningkatkan pemahaman mendengarkan dan penguasaan kosakata. Penelitian ini menjawab tiga pertanyaan utama: (1) bagaimana peserta memanfaatkan podcast, (2) tantangan yang mereka hadapi, dan (3) strategi belajar yang efektif. Data kuantitatif dari 20 responden menunjukkan bahwa YouTube merupakan platform dominan (95%), dengan kecepatan bicara (65%) dan aksen penutur (35%) sebagai hambatan utama. Wawancara kualitatif terhadap 8 partisipan mengungkap tiga strategi adaptif: pengulangan segmen (55%), penggunaan transkrip (50%), dan pencatatan kosakata. Analisis menunjukkan peningkatan signifikan dalam keterampilan menyimak (80%) dan retensi kosakata (95%), terutama saat podcast dilengkapi dengan fitur scaffolding. Temuan ini menekankan nilai pedagogis podcast sebagai sumber input otentik, serta pentingnya konten yang dapat disesuaikan kecepatannya, topik yang relevan secara budaya (disukai oleh 60%), dan dukungan belajar terintegrasi. Penelitian ini memberikan kontribusi terhadap pemahaman pembelajaran bahasa secara otonom dalam lingkungan digital, serta menyarankan integrasi kegiatan berbasis podcast dan pengembangan konten berlevel dengan dukungan multimodal.”.

Kata kunci: pembelajar EFL, podcast, keterampilan menyimak



Abstract

"This explanatory sequential mixed-methods study investigates university EFL learners' experiences with podcast-based learning for listening comprehension and vocabulary acquisition. The research addresses three key questions: (1) how learners utilize podcasts, (2) challenges encountered, and (3) effective learning strategies. Quantitative data collected from 20 participants revealed YouTube as the dominant platform (95%), with speech speed (65%) and accents (35%) as primary barriers. Qualitative interviews with 8 selected participants uncovered three adaptive strategies: segment repetition (55%), transcript utilization (50%), and vocabulary journaling. Analysis demonstrated significant improvements in listening proficiency (80% of users) and vocabulary retention (95%), particularly when podcasts incorporated scaffolding features. The study highlights the pedagogical value of podcasts as authentic input sources while emphasizing the need for speed-adjustable content, culturally familiar topics (preferred by 60%), and integrated learning supports. These findings contribute to understanding autonomous language learning in digital environments, suggesting that podcast effectiveness depends on strategic use rather than mere exposure. Practical implications include recommendations for educators to incorporate structured podcast activities and for developers to create leveled content with multimodal supports. The research bridges theoretical frameworks of comprehensible input with contemporary digital learning practices in EFL contexts.

Keywords: EFL learners, Podcasts, Listening skill

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, technology has changed how students learn languages, making the process more interactive and accessible. One of the popular tools in English language learning is podcasts, offering learners real-life listening materials and exposure to various accents. This study explores how EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners use podcasts to enhance their listening skills and build vocabulary a topic that needs more attention as educators look for effective ways to improve language learning.

Mastering listening skills and building a rich vocabulary are essential in learning English, especially for non-native speakers. Listening acts as the basis for speaking, as learners need to understand what they hear before they can respond effectively in conversations (Widodo & Gunawan, 2019; Samad & Paris, 2022). A strong vocabulary also helps students express their ideas clearly and grasp subtle meanings in communication. However, many EFL learners face difficulties, such as dealing with different accents and fast-paced speech, which can slow down their language progress.

Although research on podcasts in language learning is growing, there is still a lack of studies that explore the personal experiences of EFL learners using podcasts in their learning journey. Most previous studies focus on measuring how effective

podcasts are through numbers and statistics, without diving into learners' thoughts, challenges, and ways of overcoming difficulties (Chaves-Yuste & de-la Peña, 2023; Wang, 2024). This study aims to address this gap by exploring how podcasts influence learners' engagement and success in language learning through a qualitative approach, shedding light on both the benefits and challenges of using this medium.

By highlighting the firsthand experiences of EFL learners, this research will provide deeper insights into how podcasts can effectively support listening comprehension and vocabulary development. By listening to students' perspectives, the findings may uncover fresh ideas for designing learning activities and show how learners engage with audio-based materials. Additionally, this study could encourage educators to rethink their teaching methods and resources, promoting a more student-centered approach that maximizes the role of technology in language learning.

Recent studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of podcasts in EFL learning, particularly for listening comprehension (Wang, 2024) and vocabulary acquisition (Yazmin & Clara, 2024). While several researchers have examined podcast implementation in formal classroom settings (Elkot et al., 2024) and technical aspects of podcast design (Vuković-Stamatović & Čarapić, 2024), few have focused on learners' autonomous experiences with podcast usage in informal learning contexts. There remains a significant gap in understanding how university EFL learners strategically utilize podcasts outside classroom instruction and overcome associated challenges. Therefore, this study specifically investigates 1) students' experiential patterns in using podcasts, 2) the challenges encountered during self-directed learning, and 3) the strategies developed to optimize learning outcomes. By addressing these aspects, the research contributes to both theoretical and practical understanding of autonomous language learning in digital environments, particularly offering insights for designing more effective podcast-based learning supports tailored to learners' needs.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The integration of podcasts in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning has been proven to provide many benefits for students, especially in improving listening comprehension, pronunciation, vocabulary acquisition and learning motivation. Podcasts not only help them understand conversations in English better,

but also encourage confidence in speaking. Various studies have shown that podcasts can improve language competence, especially in listening and speaking skills, making them an effective learning tool, especially for secondary school students (Chaves et al., 2023; Wang, 2024). One strategy that can make learning with podcasts more effective is to hold a discussion before listening, as this allows students to have a preliminary overview of the topics covered, improving their understanding, as well as emphasizing the importance of interaction in the learning process, where students can share opinions, ask questions, and be more active in understanding the material (Elkot et al., 2024; Barjesteh & Ghaseminia, 2023).

Not only for high school students, podcasts are also very beneficial for university students, especially those who still have limitations in English. By listening to podcasts, they can enrich their vocabulary, improve their language comprehension, and be more confident in communicating. In addition, since podcasts often present content that is interesting and relevant to everyday life, college students tend to be more motivated and engaged in language learning (Yazmin & Clara, 2024). Podcasts are also a valuable learning resource for students focusing on English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and English for Science and Technology (EST), especially those related to science and technology, as they often use rich vocabulary and fast paced speech. While this can be challenging for those who lack proficiency in English, with the right guidance and strategies, these types of podcasts can help them improve their academic and professional understanding in English (Vuković-Stamatović & Čarapić, 2024). Interestingly, the benefits of podcasts in education are not just limited to language learning. Podcasts are also used in other fields, such as medical ethics education, where medical students can learn through interactive discussions about ethical dilemmas that often occur in the medical world. Because podcasts are flexible and can be accessed at any time, students can learn in a more relaxed yet effective way (Schiff et al., 2024). Overall, various studies show that podcasts are not just an entertainment medium, but also a versatile learning tool. With the right approach, podcasts can help students and college students at different levels of education to learn in a way that is more engaging, effective and relevant to their lives.

Podcasts not only help students become more proficient in the language, but also make it easier for them to understand English conversations and adapt to various learning styles. Research shows that video podcasts are very effective for teaching proverbs in English, because in addition to introducing new vocabulary, they also help students understand the culture behind them (Nikbakht & Mazdayasna, 2023).

Moreover, frequent listening to podcasts can make students subconsciously learn new words, which is especially useful for those who come from different language backgrounds (Hakobyan, 2023; Mukhtorova, 2024). Indeed, there are some challenges in understanding podcasts, such as difficult vocabulary, speaking speed, or dialect differences. However, research on advanced LIPA students shows that they still make progress in understanding the content of podcasts. This proves that the way students respond to the listening process greatly affects their learning outcomes (Andajani et al., 2023).

In addition, listening to podcasts repeatedly has been shown to improve students' ability to understand English conversations. Research shows that after using this method, students get better test scores and feel more satisfied with their learning process (Rmelah & Pornwiriyaakit, 2023). Not only in English, the podcast method has also proven effective in Russian language learning. Students who learned with podcasts experienced improvements in grammar, speaking, listening, pronunciation and writing. The same was also found in a study at Al-Ittihadiyah High School, where students showed improvement in listening skills after learning with podcasts for two months (Li et al., 2024). In addition, the variety of audio materials and interactive listening activities further strengthen the benefits of podcasts in learning English as a second language (ESL) as well as foreign language (EFL) (Dianingsih et al., 2023; Datin Huliyany et al., 2024).

From these various studies, it is clear that podcasts are not just entertainment, but also effective learning tools. With podcasts, students can more easily overcome difficulties in listening, feel more involved in the learning process, and enjoy a more interesting and fun way of learning. Podcasts have been widely studied as a language learning tool and have been proven to help improve listening comprehension, motivation, autonomy, and student engagement. Various studies show that podcasts can enrich vocabulary, enhance pronunciation, and develop other language skills. However, most research focuses more on the benefits without addressing potential challenges, such as technological difficulties, dependence on passive listening, and differences in students' digital literacy. Moreover, existing studies tend to examine the overall effectiveness of podcasts without truly exploring students' real experiences such as the obstacles they face and the strategies they use to learn more effectively. Therefore, further research is needed to gain a deeper understanding of how podcasts genuinely support students in improving their listening skills and expanding their vocabulary while also identifying the best ways to overcome existing challenges.

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METHOD

This study employs an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design, beginning with quantitative data collection through questionnaires administered to 20 EFL university students to identify podcast usage patterns (frequency, preferred platforms, and major challenges), followed by qualitative in-depth interviews with 8 purposefully selected participants to explore coping strategies and learning experiences in detail. The quantitative phase revealed key patterns, while the qualitative phase provided deeper understanding of how learners address these challenges. Through methodological triangulation, the study integrates these datasets to both quantify phenomena and explain their underlying mechanisms, offering comprehensive insights into how EFL learners autonomously utilize podcasts beyond classroom settings while overcoming inherent difficulties in informal learning environments.

This research was conducted in February-June 2025 at one of the campuses in Bojonegoro, East Java. The participants were students from the English Education program at a university in Bojonegoro, East Java. Participants were students from the English Education program. Twenty students completed the questionnaire, which provided baseline data. Of these, eight students were selected for more in-depth semi-structured interviews using purposive sampling. The selection was based on their willingness to take part in the interview and their diverse experiences of learning through podcasts. This sampling method was used as it helps

researchers select participants who have knowledge and experience relevant to the topic being studied

Data for this study were collected using two main tools: a questionnaire and semi structured interviews. The questionnaire, adapted from previous studies (Yazmin & Clara, 2024; Aprianto, 2024), included a mix of Likert-scale, multiple-choice, and open-ended questions. The aim was to find out how often students used podcasts, how long they listened to them, what types of podcasts they preferred, the benefits they perceived, and the challenges they faced. On the other hand, the interviews were intended to explore students' experiences in more depth. They focused on how students actually used podcasts, what problems they faced, and what strategies they used to aid their learning.

The interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis, based on the steps outlined by (Braun & Clarke, 2019). These steps include familiarizing oneself with the data, creating initial codes, identifying themes, reviewing them, and finally defining and naming the themes. The researchers manually coded and grouped the responses into main themes related to the research questions. The questionnaire results were used to support and cross-check the interview findings, thereby helping to strengthen the accuracy and credibility of the study. By combining these two data sources, this study was able to provide a more complete and credible picture of how EFL students experience learning through podcasts.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

FINDINGS

This study utilized two data collection instruments: a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. The purpose was to explore the experiences of university EFL learners in using podcasts as a learning tool, particularly for improving their listening skills and vocabulary acquisition. The research was conducted at a university in Bojonegoro in 2025.

A total of 20 students participated in the questionnaire, and 8 of those students were later selected as interview participants based on their responses and willingness to elaborate on their experiences in greater detail. The questionnaire was designed to answer all three research questions related to students' experiences, challenges, and strategies in using podcasts. The interview data were used to support and enrich the findings from the questionnaire, providing more in-depth insights into individual learners' perspectives.

Students' Experiences in Using Podcasts

The majority of EFL students reported using podcasts with moderate frequency, with 65% indicating occasional use, often during daily routines such as before sleeping or while doing chores. Most learners engaged with podcasts for short durations, typically 5–10 minutes per session, reflecting a preference for concise, manageable content. This flexible usage aligns with the nature of podcasts as mobile-friendly and adaptable learning tools, allowing students to integrate English practice into their everyday lives without requiring structured study time.

YouTube was the dominant platform, selected by 95% of participants. Its popularity stemmed from accessibility, familiarity, and visual features such as subtitles, which many students used to support comprehension. Other platforms like Spotify and TikTok were rarely used, and none selected Apple or Google Podcasts. This platform choice illustrates learners' tendency to gravitate toward multi-modal media that offers both audio and visual input. Participants also favored podcast content centered on daily conversations (60%) and motivational themes (25%), choosing topics they found relevant to real-life communication and personal interest.

Interview data supported these patterns, revealing that learners discovered podcasts either through academic recommendation or social media exposure. For instance, some students encountered podcast clips on Instagram or TikTok, while others were introduced through classroom settings. Those who found podcasts via academic sources tended to use them more consistently. This reflects how both informal and formal influences shape learner engagement. Overall, students' experiences demonstrate that podcast use is influenced by accessibility, content relevance, and the ability to fit language input into flexible, informal contexts.

Perceived Benefits of Podcasts

Students reported several benefits of using podcasts in their English learning, particularly in improving listening comprehension. A total of 80% of participants found podcasts moderately to very helpful in understanding spoken English. Through repeated exposure to native speech in various accents and speech rates, learners became more familiar with natural language patterns. One student noted that listening to different speakers helped them adapt to real-world

English, including variations in intonation and rhythm. This supports the value of podcasts as sources of authentic input that align with learners' daily language needs.

Vocabulary development was also frequently mentioned. Based on questionnaire responses, 95% of students experienced vocabulary growth to varying degrees. Learners reported acquiring new words through context rather than memorization, as podcasts often present vocabulary in meaningful dialogues. Several students also noted improvement in pronunciation and idiomatic usage. For instance, one participant mentioned learning how certain expressions were naturally used by native speakers. This incidental exposure enabled students to absorb new lexical items in context, reinforcing retention and practical application.

Motivational factors played a key role in students' continued podcast use. 75% of learners expressed increased motivation and confidence as a result of engaging with podcasts. The ability to access content anytime and choose topics based on personal interest contributed to a sense of autonomy and enjoyment. Participants emphasized that podcasts made English feel more accessible and less intimidating, especially when compared to traditional textbook materials. This motivational boost not only encouraged frequent use but also contributed to more sustained language engagement over time.

Challenges Faced in Podcast-Based Learning

The most frequently reported challenge in using podcasts was the speed of speech, selected by 65% of students. Learners found that the natural pace of native speakers often exceeded their listening ability, leading to difficulties in comprehension. This was reinforced through interviews, where students described the need to replay segments multiple times due to fast delivery. One student commented, "The speed is too fast, and sometimes there are slang or cultural terms I don't understand." This challenge indicates a mismatch between authentic input and learners' processing capacity, particularly for those at lower proficiency levels.

Table 1: Frequency of Main Challenges Faced in Understanding Podcasts

Challenges	Students	Percentage
Speed of Speech	13	65%
Difficult Vocabulary	4	20%

Lack of Understanding	2	10%
Lack of Motivation	1	5%
Total:	20	100%

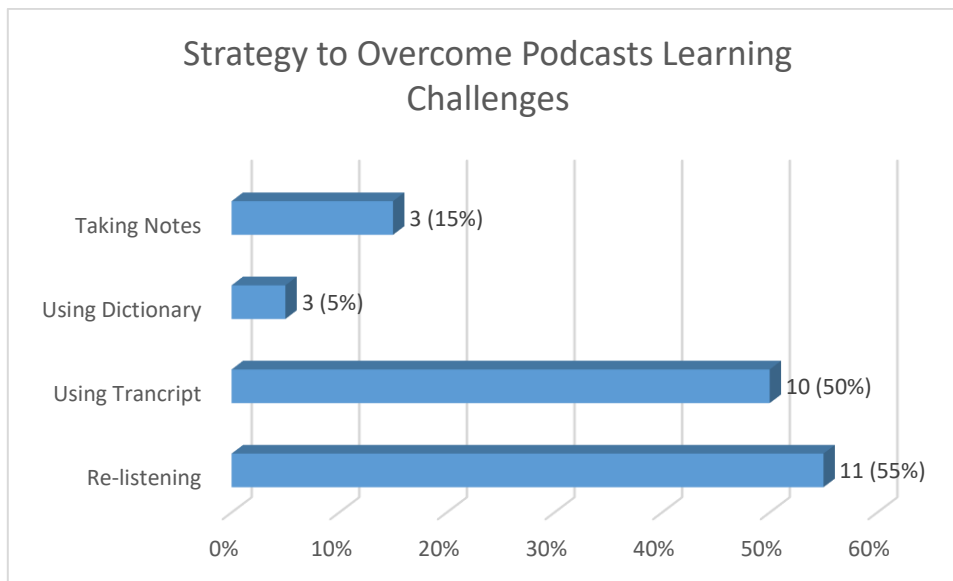
Another significant barrier was the variation in accents, which affected 35% of participants. Learners noted that certain regional accents such as Indian or British English were particularly difficult to follow. While questionnaires emphasized speech rate, interviews revealed accent as an equally disruptive factor. In addition, 20% of students cited difficult vocabulary as a challenge, especially idiomatic or culturally specific terms. These lexical gaps hindered overall comprehension and required additional support such as dictionaries or transcripts. One participant reflected, "Sometimes I get confused by idioms or slang, especially when spoken quickly."

Technical and situational factors also contributed to podcast-related difficulties. Several students mentioned poor audio quality, unclear pronunciation, or background noise in recordings as barriers to effective listening. Moreover, environmental distractions such as noisy spaces or multitasking during listening were reported to reduce focus and understanding. These findings suggest that both linguistic and non-linguistic elements affect learners' ability to fully benefit from podcasts, emphasizing the importance of structured guidance and well produced content.

Strategies to Overcome Difficulties

To address the comprehension difficulties faced during podcast learning, students employed a variety of strategies. The most common was re-listening to difficult segments, selected by 55% of respondents. This allowed learners to review content at their own pace, reinforcing understanding through repetition. Interviews supported this finding, with several participants stating that they would replay unclear parts until the meaning became clear. One student noted, "I repeat it until I really get the point." This approach highlights learners' active efforts to regulate and manage their listening challenges.

Figure 1. Frequency of Strategy to Overcome Challenges



Another frequently used strategy was reading transcripts, reported by 50% of students. Learners found that combining audio with written text helped them identify unfamiliar vocabulary, confirm what they heard, and better follow fast-paced speech. Several participants also relied on subtitles, particularly when using platforms like YouTube. Others used online dictionaries to clarify unknown words or expressions, while 15% of respondents actively noted down new vocabulary for future study. These strategies align with self-regulated learning principles, combining cognitive and metacognitive tools to support comprehension and retention.

Students also differed in how often they applied these strategies. While 45% used them moderately, 25% applied them frequently, and 20% used them very often, indicating consistent engagement across varying levels of autonomy. Learners' ability to adapt these strategies based on personal need reflects growing metacognitive awareness. Some students even used external tools to generate transcripts when unavailable on the platform. These findings suggest that effective podcast learning is not passive but involves active engagement with digital tools and repetition techniques, allowing learners to maximize the input they receive.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the experiences of university EFL learners in using podcasts to develop their English listening skills and vocabulary. The findings demonstrate that podcasts offer meaningful benefits, including increased exposure to authentic language, enhanced vocabulary acquisition, and greater learner

motivation. Despite challenges such as fast speech, unfamiliar accents, and limited technical quality, students actively employed adaptive strategies such as re-listening, reading transcripts, and using digital tools to enhance their comprehension. These behaviors reflect a growing metacognitive awareness and an ability to manage self-directed learning in digital environments.

The study advances the field of EFL listening pedagogy by providing empirical validation of how podcasts function as comprehensible input and support autonomous learning strategies in real-world contexts. Importantly, the results underscore the value of learner agency, topic relevance, and flexible learning environments in sustaining engagement. From a practical perspective, the findings suggest that educators should integrate guided podcast use into curricula, train students in effective listening strategies, and select materials aligned with learners' interests and proficiency levels.

Future research may examine podcast-based learning across different EFL proficiency groups or explore its impact on speaking and pronunciation skills. Additionally, comparative studies between podcast learning and other digital media (e.g., YouTube, audiobooks) could offer insights into platform-specific advantages. As digital learning tools become increasingly central to language education, this study offers a foundation for optimizing podcast use as a pedagogical medium that balances authenticity, accessibility, and learner autonomy.

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