

## **Podcast Experiences: EFL Students' Challenges and Strategies in Listening to English**

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### **Abstract**

*Listening is a fundamental skill in language acquisition; however, many EFL learners still face real challenges in understanding spoken English. Podcasts offer an innovative and accessible medium for self-directed learning, making them a potential solution for improving listening skills. This study examines the challenges and strategies students use to improve their English listening skills through podcasts. A qualitative descriptive design was used, involving 10 English Education students who engaged with podcasts as part of their learning. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, conducted both on campus and via phone, and analyzed qualitatively by transcribing and organizing the data to identify students' challenges and strategies. The findings reveal that students face various obstacles such as speech speed, diverse accents, unfamiliar vocabulary, and idiomatic expressions, which can hinder comprehension. To overcome these challenges, students adopt strategies such as using subtitles, adjusting playback speed, re-listening to difficult segments, and taking detailed notes on new words and phrases. These approaches helped students increase their vocabulary, strengthen listening comprehension, and engage more deeply with the content. The findings highlight the effectiveness of combining tailored strategies with podcasts, emphasizing their potential as a valuable tool for language development. This study offers useful insights for educators and learners alike, underscoring the importance of flexible learning methods to address various difficulties in English listening comprehension.*

**Keywords:** *listening, podcast, students' challenges, strategies*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Listening is a fundamental skill in communication and language learning. It enables students to understand spoken language, which is essential before developing other skills such as speaking, reading, and writing. Previous research highlights the effectiveness of using podcasts to improve listening comprehension. Hadi et al. (2021) showed that integrating podcasts into English lessons significantly improved students' listening skills. Similarly, Damayanti & Hadi (2022) confirmed that podcasts serve as an effective strategy for developing EFL students' listening skills. These findings underscore the importance of listening skills not only in daily communication but also in the overall language acquisition process. Given the increasing relevance of digital media in education, the use of podcasts offers students a practical tool to improve their listening skills flexibly and engagingly.

Podcasting, as an authentic resource for teaching listening, is an innovative mobile technology that includes a series of video and digital audio broadcasts, which can be downloaded and played on mobile devices (Abdulrahman et al., 2018). Using podcasts in a language classroom enables students to comprehend content, enhance their proficiency, and improve their listening comprehension. Podcasts, typically in MP3 format, are practical and simple to store on portable devices, enabling students to practice English more easily

and conveniently (Rahayuningsih et al., 2021). Podcasts, as a form of digital media, provide a valuable opportunity for improving listening skills through various flexible formats. Due to their easy accessibility, podcasts can be accessed at any time and from any location, allowing students to practice listening outside of a traditional classroom environment and fostering independent learning (Gonulal, 2022). Recent studies also emphasize that integrating podcasts into language learning enhances student motivation and engagement, particularly when the content aligns with their interests, which further encourages active listening and language acquisition (Meden et al., 2024). Overall, podcasts are an effective digital tool for developing listening abilities. With their adaptable format and on-the-go accessibility, podcasts empower students to learn independently, enhancing their understanding of the material, boosting language skills, and strengthening their listening comprehension practically.

Various studies have shown the potential of podcasts as an effective listening and learning medium. Indahsari (2020) states that podcasts can increase student motivation and listening skills. Another study by Gulo et al. (2023) supports the idea that the use of podcasts in listening learning can improve students' understanding of spoken language in a more engaging and relevant way. Ismail, Syofianis, and Oktasari (2016) found that podcasts, as a source of authentic material, can enhance students' listening comprehension, as demonstrated by their improved test results. Additionally, Rachmaniputri et al. (2021) reported that podcasts positively influenced students' motivation, engagement, and their perception of performance in listening classes.

However, despite these positive results, most prior studies primarily focus on the benefits of using podcasts or the outcomes of podcast-based instruction without thoroughly investigating the specific listening difficulties students face or the detailed strategies they apply to overcome those difficulties. For example, while Indahsari (2020), Gulo et al. (2023), and Rachmaniputri et al. (2021) highlight improvements in motivation and performance, they do not delve deeply into how students manage comprehension obstacles in authentic listening contexts. This gap suggests the need for further research that explores students' personal experiences and the practical strategies they use when encountering listening barriers such as fast speech, varied accents, unfamiliar vocabulary, and idiomatic expressions.

This study aims to fill this gap by focusing on the real challenges faced by students and how they independently overcome these challenges when using podcasts. The uniqueness of this study lies in its thematic exploration of student-driven strategies—such as subtitle activation, playback speed adjustment, replay, and vocabulary note-taking—which are often underrepresented in previous research. By centering the analysis on students' self-regulation practices outside the classroom, this study also contributes to a deeper understanding of independent language learning through podcasts in an EFL context. To achieve this, the study addresses the following research questions: (1) What challenges do students face when listening to English through podcasts? and (2) What strategies do students use to overcome these challenges?

## **METHOD**

This study aims to explore the specific challenges and strategies used by students when using English podcasts as a source of listening learning. This research was conducted using a descriptive design with a qualitative approach, involving 3rd- and 5th-semester students of the English Education Study Program at a private university in Makassar. The descriptive design aims to describe individuals, events, or conditions in their natural state without manipulating variables. This design is effective in identifying population characteristics as well as variations in practice among existing groups. According to Siedlecki (2020), descriptive design involves studying individuals, events, or conditions as they naturally occur, without intervening in the variables. In this study, a descriptive design

was applied, allowing researchers to explore and describe students' real experiences of listening to podcasts. Since the focus was on understanding the strategies and challenges that occurred naturally, the researchers did not attempt to control or change any variables, in line with the principles of descriptive qualitative research.

The subjects of this study were 10 students from the English Language Education Program who were already familiar with learning through podcasts. These students were selected purposively based on two main criteria: (1) they have experience using English podcasts for learning, and (2) they have sufficient English proficiency to interact with podcast content. This sampling technique was chosen because purposive sampling allows researchers to select participants who can provide rich and relevant information in line with the research objectives (Palinkas et al., 2015). Their participation was voluntary, and written consent was obtained before the research was conducted.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, a method that allows for guided yet flexible conversations to explore participants' experiences in depth. This approach provides a balance between structured questioning and open-ended dialogue, making it suitable for qualitative studies (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018). Interviews were conducted face-to-face on campus and via phone calls, depending on participants' availability and convenience. The interview atmosphere was informal and conducted in either Bahasa Indonesia or English, depending on the flow of the conversation and the comfort of the participants. The interview questions focused on the students' experiences listening to podcasts, the challenges they faced, and the strategies they used to overcome those challenges. Each interview lasted about 20 minutes and was recorded with the participants' permission.

The data in this study were analyzed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis was used to examine the data collected from the interviews. This method helps researchers organize and interpret qualitative data by identifying recurring patterns or shared meanings across participants' responses. It is suitable for studies aiming to explore personal experiences in depth and allows the researcher to maintain the complexity of participants' voices without reducing them to numbers (Braun & Clarke, 2019). In this study, the analysis process involved several steps: first, the researcher transcribed each recorded interview word for word. The transcripts were then reviewed several times to gain a strong understanding of the content. After that, the researcher generated initial codes to capture meaningful statements related to students' challenges and strategies. These codes were grouped into broader categories that reflected repeated ideas or common concerns. Finally, the researcher refined and labeled.

## **RESULTS**

The interview findings indicate that students considered podcasts helpful for improving their English listening skills, pronunciation, and vocabulary. However, they also reported challenges, including fast speakers, different accents, and unfamiliar words or idioms. To overcome these issues, the students used several strategies, such as using media features like the subtitle feature and the audio slow-down feature, re-listening to the podcasts, and writing down new words. These challenges and strategies are discussed in detail in the following sections.

### **Challenges in Listening to Podcasts**

#### ***Speaking Speed***

One of the most frequent challenges students face is the speed of speech used by the podcast narrator. This makes it difficult for them to catch every word the narrator says, especially when they are not used to hearing podcasts in English. This shows that a fast pace of speech can hinder the listener from following the entire content of the podcast.

**Extract 1:**

*“The challenge is usually the speed of the speaker. They talk so fast that sometimes it's hard for me to catch them.” (S2)*

Interestingly, while speaking fast is challenging, speaking too slowly can also be a problem in listening to English podcasts. Students feel that the narrator speaking too slowly can also make the podcast boring and reduce their interest. This was expressed by the student below:

**Extract 2:**

*“If the narrator's speaking speed is too fast, sometimes it's hard to catch all the words spoken. But if it's very slow, it's also boring” (S9)*

The student also highlighted the challenge of the narrator's speaking speed but with an interesting difference. He explained that speaking too fast makes it difficult to catch all the words spoken by the narrator. However, he also added that if the narrator speaks too slowly, he feels bored. This difference shows that the ideal speed of speech is important, not too fast that it is difficult to understand, but also not too slow that it loses its appeal to the listener.

***Varied Accents***

Accent diversity is also a big challenge for English-speaking podcast students. Diverse accents, such as American, British, or Australian, often confuse and require adjustments in understanding pronunciation. Differences in pronunciation and speech patterns can hinder comprehension, especially for students who are not familiar with these accents. Words can sound very different depending on the accent of the speaker, leading to misunderstandings or missed information in podcasts. This becomes more difficult when students hear rare accents or regional variations that differ from the standard English they are used to.

**Extract 3:**

*“The first time I listened to a British accent podcast, it made me confused and my head was spinning. But as time goes by, I often get used to listening to podcasts” (S4)*

Student 4 informs that British accents can be an initial challenge for unfamiliar listeners. The student explained that the first time he listened to a podcast with a British accent, he found it difficult and felt confused. However, the interviewee also noted that with frequent listening to the podcast, he started to get used to the accent.

There is a student who also finds it difficult with different accents, and this is reinforced by this interview:

**Extract 4:**

*“Different accents, such as American, British, or Australian, make understanding more difficult” (S9)*

The student explained that different accents, such as American, British, or Australian, make understanding English more difficult. The differences in pronunciation and speech patterns in each of these accents can be confusing, especially for students who are not familiar with them. Students highlighted that these accent variations are a common obstacle faced when listening to English podcasts.

### ***Unfamiliar Words***

Students often find it difficult to understand unfamiliar words when listening to English podcasts. This challenge arises when podcast speakers use words that students have never encountered before. The unfamiliarity of these words makes it difficult for students to understand the meaning of the content, as they are unsure of the meaning of the words. In addition, the speed of spoken language in podcasts can make it difficult for students to fully understand unfamiliar words, leaving students confused or unsure of the message being conveyed. As a result, students may have difficulty following the rest of the conversation or miss important details in listening to a podcast. One student explained this difficulty:

#### **Extract 5:**

*“...very often the speaker used unfamiliar words that make me confused...”* (S6)

This statement indicates that the student found it difficult to understand some of the sentences used by the speaker in the podcast. These sentences may contain vocabulary, expressions, or language structures that are unfamiliar to the listener, leading to confusion about their meaning. This indicates a challenge in understanding the way the information is conveyed or the language style of the speaker.

### ***Idiomatic Expressions***

The students revealed that they faced challenges when encountering idiomatic expressions in the podcast. These idioms often have meanings that are not immediately obvious on a word-for-word basis. Since idiomatic expressions do not follow the literal meaning of each word, students often find it difficult to understand their meaning from the context alone. This can lead to confusion, as students may interpret the expression based on the literal meaning of the words, which can lead to misunderstandings, requiring extra effort to understand. For example, one student shared:

#### **Extract 6:**

*“Native speakers like to use idioms, and I don't understand what it means. In that situation, I have to stop and find out the meaning first.”* (S1)

This statement shows that students find it difficult to understand idioms or special expressions used by speakers. Idioms often have figurative meanings that cannot be translated literally, which is a barrier for listeners who are not familiar with the expression.

## **Strategies to Overcome Challenges**

### ***Utilizing Media Features***

One strategy that students often use to improve their understanding when listening to material is the utilization of media features. There are two Media features used, such as subtitles and playback speed settings, that provide convenience in accessing information and help students better understand the content being delivered. With these features, students can customize their learning experience according to their needs, especially when facing challenges such as language that is difficult to understand or narration that is too fast.

### ***Using Subtitles***

Subtitles are a feature that allows students to follow the subtitles of what the narrator is saying, making it easier for them to understand unfamiliar words or phrases. By displaying the written version of spoken language, subtitles help students identify and recognize words they may not have known before. This feature can help students connect the spoken word with the written form, making it easier to understand the content of the podcast. In addition,

subtitles can help improve spelling and word recognition, as students can see the correct spelling of the unfamiliar word.

**Extract 7:**

*“I usually activate the subtitles feature on YouTube. For example, if I don't activate it from the beginning, sometimes in the middle I lose focus because I don't know what's being said, so I activate it so I can focus again and it's not complicated.” (S7)*

The student explains the strategy used by the respondent when listening to podcasts, which is activating the subtitle feature. One of them, when watching videos on YouTube, activates the subtitle feature to help understand the content. Student 7 explained that although he usually does not activate subtitles from the beginning, he often loses focus in the middle of a video if he does not know what is being talked about. To overcome this, she activates the subtitles in the middle of the video to help her refocus and understand what is being talked about without struggling. This shows that the subtitle feature helps maintain comprehension and attention flow while watching content.

***Adjusting Playback Speed***

Secondly, the slowed-down playback speed feature allows students to adjust the playback tempo to make it easier to understand. By slowing down the speed, students have more time to process and digest the information conveyed by the narrator in the podcast. This feature is especially helpful when the speaker speaks too fast or uses unfamiliar vocabulary. Slowing down the playback allows students to hear the words more clearly, making it easier to follow the content. In addition, this feature also helps improve their listening skills as they can focus on each word and phrase without finding it difficult to listen.

**Extract 8:**

*“I usually adjust the speed through the podcast app, or choose podcasts where the narrator speaks clearly and at the rhythm I like.” (S9)*

The student explains that the strategy used when listening to podcasts is adjusting the playback speed through the app. This strategy allows the listener to match the pace of the narration to their comfort level. If the narrator speaks too quickly, the playback speed can be slowed down to make the information easier to understand. On the other hand, if the narrator speaks too slowly, the playback speed can be increased to maintain the flow of the podcast. With this strategy, the listener can ensure they follow the content effectively without missing important information.

***Re-listening to Podcasts***

This study found that re-listening to podcasts was a strategy that students used to improve their comprehension. Students revealed that they often re-listen to podcasts both as a whole and certain parts that are difficult to understand. There are differences in the way students apply this strategy, namely by repeating the entire episode or only the parts that are not understood. Some students preferred to re-listen to the whole podcast to understand the overall message, while others focused only on the part, they found difficult. This allows them to pay more attention to certain words or phrases that they missed the first time they listened, thus helping them to better understand the content of the podcast. By re-listening, students can reinforce their understanding and improve their listening skills over time.

**Extract 9:**

*“My strategy is to re-listen to the same podcast if I don't understand it. Usually, I listen again until I completely understand it.” (S2)*

This student demonstrates how re-listening to a podcast helps them capture details missed during the first listen, reinforcing their understanding of the content. If the student feels they did not fully grasp the content during the first playback, they will re-listen from the beginning to ensure that all parts of the podcast are thoroughly understood. This process allows them to capture information that might have been missed or misunderstood initially, ensuring a deeper understanding of the podcast as a whole.

**Extract 10:**

*“My purpose of watching podcasts is not for studying, it's more of a leisure activity. But I repeat it at the time I'm watching it because if there's a word I don't know, I repeat that part. If I want to go back to the beginning, I don't, I'd rather find another podcast.” (S1)*

Unlike the first student, this student applies a similar strategy of re-listening but prefers to repeat only specific parts of the podcast, such as words that are difficult to understand. They do not re-listen to the entire podcast but choose the parts they find important or confusing.

**Jotting New Vocabulary**

Jotting down new words or expressions found while listening to podcasts is one of the strategies students use to expand their vocabulary. This strategy helps students to better understand the content of the podcast and enrich their vocabulary that can be applied in daily communication. However, there are differences in the way this strategy is applied among students.

**Extract 11:**

*“I take notes if I have a book near me, but it depends on my mood again.” (S3)*

In this extract, the student notes new words only when there is a notebook nearby. This note-taking strategy is not done consistently, because it depends on the situation and the student's mood at that time. This approach is more spontaneous and unstructured.

**Extract 12:**

*“I have a special notebook that I usually keep near my bed, so if I get a new word, I write it down. I typically write down idioms or new words that I don't know yet. Then I memorize them.” (S1)*

Unlike the first extract, this student has prepared a special notebook to record new vocabulary. The book is kept in an easily accessible place, so taking notes becomes a more organized habit. In addition to taking notes, students also try to memorize the vocabulary that has been recorded to improve their understanding and mastery of vocabulary.

The findings indicate that although students face various challenges in listening to English-language podcasts, they also demonstrate independence in overcoming these obstacles through adaptive strategies that enhance language comprehension and learning.

**DISCUSSION**

This study explored the challenges faced by students when listening to English through podcasts and the strategies they employed to overcome those challenges. Based on the findings, four main obstacles were identified: speaking speed, varied accents, unfamiliar vocabulary, and idiomatic expressions. The data also showed that students responded to these difficulties by choosing practical and varied strategies to help them understand podcast content more effectively.

One of the most frequent issues reported by students was the speaking speed of the narrator. Fast-paced narration often causes students to miss important information and reduces their overall comprehension. This is consistent with Hasibuan & Male (2022), who noted that fast delivery is a common barrier for EFL learners, particularly those at beginner or intermediate levels. To address this, students relied on the playback speed adjustment feature to slow down the audio, allowing more time to process spoken information. While not all previous studies explicitly discuss this feature, it is evident in practice that playback adjustment can help regulate cognitive load and improve focus (Wahyuni et al., 2024).

The second challenge involved varied accents, including American, British, and Australian. Students found it difficult to understand different pronunciation styles, particularly when the accent was unfamiliar. This supports the findings of Olegovna & Yurievna (2021) who emphasized that regional phonetic variations in English often lead to comprehension difficulties. Similarly, Vasquez Diaz & Iqbal (2024) found that international students may require several months of consistent exposure to unfamiliar accents to build adequate understanding. In response, students in this study adopted the strategy of re-listening, either to the entire episode or to specific segments, until comprehension was achieved. This practice increased their familiarity with accent differences and contributed to long-term listening fluency (Wahyuni et al., 2024).

Another significant barrier identified was unfamiliar vocabulary. Students often encountered new words that disrupted their understanding of the podcast content. Vocabulary knowledge plays a key role in successful listening comprehension, as noted by Zhang & Graham (2020). To address this issue, students activated subtitle features, especially when using platforms like YouTube. Subtitles enabled them to see the written form of unfamiliar words, facilitating recognition and contextual guessing. Matkivska (2014) emphasized the effectiveness of subtitles in synchronizing audio and text input, which supports better comprehension and vocabulary retention in language learning.

The final challenge students encountered was the use of idiomatic expressions in podcasts. Idioms, due to their non-literal meanings, caused confusion and interrupted understanding. This type of language is particularly difficult for EFL learners as it often reflects culture-bound meanings that are not transparent (Zhang & Graham, 2020). To manage this, students used a jotting strategy, writing down unfamiliar idioms or phrases in a notebook. Some even created personal vocabulary journals near their bed or study spaces to review and memorize later. This strategy aligns with Salame & Thompson's (2020) finding that strategic note-taking fosters deeper cognitive engagement. Additionally, Khavazi et al. (2018) supported the idea that creating personalized vocabulary lists enhances listening performance through repeated exposure and reflection.

Overall, these findings show that while students face substantial challenges when listening to podcasts in English, they also find practical ways to overcome those difficulties. Each challenge is met with a specific, personally chosen strategy that helps make the content easier to understand. By using features like subtitles, slowing down audio, re-listening to difficult parts, or taking notes, students adjusted the learning process to fit their needs. These actions show how students made thoughtful decisions to improve their understanding, using digital tools in ways that felt most helpful to them. Podcasts, when combined with such strategies, offer a flexible and effective way to support listening improvement in EFL contexts.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study concludes that students experienced several challenges when using podcasts to improve their English listening skills. These challenges include speaking speed, varied accents, unfamiliar vocabulary, and idiomatic expressions, which often hinder their comprehension of the content. To address these obstacles, students implemented multiple strategies such as activating subtitle features, adjusting the audio using the slow-down

feature, re-listening to difficult segments, and jotting down unfamiliar words or expressions. These strategies proved useful in enhancing not only their understanding of the audio but also their vocabulary development and overall listening fluency.

The findings affirm that podcasts, when combined with learner-centered and consistent strategy use, serve as an effective medium for supporting listening comprehension in EFL contexts. The study shows that students are capable of identifying and applying strategies that fit their needs when dealing with real-life listening materials. While this study demonstrates the benefits of specific strategies such as re-listening and slowing down the audio, it does not explore the long-term effects of regular podcast use. Future researchers are encouraged to investigate whether sustained podcast engagement can improve not only listening comprehension but also other language skills, such as speaking and writing, and deepen learners' understanding of idiomatic language and grammatical structures.

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