

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

Listening is widely recognized as one of the most fundamental skills in language learning, as it serves as the primary channel through which learners receive and process oral input in both formal and informal contexts. In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) settings, listening plays a crucial role in developing overall communicative competence because it provides the necessary input for other language skills to develop, including speaking, vocabulary mastery, and grammatical knowledge. Without adequate listening skills, learners cannot engage effectively in real-life communication, as they are unable to comprehend spoken messages, respond appropriately, or participate in meaningful conversations. Moreover, listening is the skill most frequently used in daily communication, yet it receives the least systematic attention in many EFL classrooms. This disparity between the importance of listening and the limited instructional focus it receives creates a significant gap in learners' language development, particularly in contexts where English is not used outside the classroom. Therefore, reinforcing listening skills through targeted instructional interventions is essential to equip EFL learners with the ability to process authentic spoken English and to prepare them for real-world communicative demands.

Despite its importance, listening remains one of the most challenging skills for EFL students in Indonesia, where English is not used in everyday communication. When exposed to natural spoken English, students frequently struggle to process rapid, continuous speech that contains spontaneous expressions, reduced forms, and natural interaction patterns. Unlike scripted classroom recordings, authentic spoken English demands immediate comprehension without the opportunity to pause or re-read, placing significant cognitive demands on learners who have limited exposure to real-world English input [1]. The primary

difficulties students encounter in listening comprehension can be categorized into several aspects: the speed of speech, which often exceeds their processing capacity; unfamiliar vocabulary that is not recognized quickly enough to maintain comprehension; and the phonological features of natural speech, such as connected speech, reductions, and elision, which cause words to sound different from their citation forms. These challenges are compounded by the lack of contextualized listening practice in the classroom, where materials are often simplified and artificially constructed, failing to prepare students for the complexity of authentic spoken English.

A key factor underlying this difficulty is limited contextual vocabulary knowledge. In authentic spoken English, vocabulary appears embedded in continuous speech, leaving learners little time to infer meaning. Students who rely primarily on isolated word memorization often fail to recognize the same vocabulary when encountered in authentic spoken English, because meaning in spoken communication is shaped by surrounding context, intonation, and discourse flow. Successful vocabulary learning requires not only knowing a word's form and meaning in isolation, but also the ability to use and understand it in meaningful contexts [2]. Without contextual vocabulary knowledge, learners cannot rapidly process lexical input during real-time listening, causing comprehension to break down.

These challenges were empirically identified at SMAS Islam Diponegoro through a preliminary diagnostic listening test administered to the prospective experimental group in XI B-2 class during the researcher's teaching practice observation in the odd semester of the 2025/2026 academic year. This research involved 36 students and was conducted during the researcher's pre-observation visit. The average score on this diagnostic test was 61.4, falling below the school's Minimum Completion Criteria (KKM) of 75. In addition, students demonstrated difficulty not only in following natural-speed oral English but also in recognizing vocabulary as it functioned within authentic spoken English. Based on direct classroom observations and an informal interview with the English teacher conducted during the pre-observation visit, the prevailing vocabulary instruction

was found to be predominantly decontextualized, relying heavily on word lists and translation exercises, which failed to prepare students to process lexical items in real oral communication. These empirical findings provided the direct motivation for the present study.

Further observation revealed that listening materials used in class were largely simplified and adapted, rather than drawn from authentic spoken English sources. While simplified materials may support beginning learners, they inadequately represent how English is used in real communicative contexts. Authentic spoken English exposes learners to language as it is genuinely used, providing a more accurate representation of communicative norms than artificially simplified texts [3]. This gap between classroom input and authentic spoken English leaves students unprepared when encountering natural spoken language outside the classroom.

Podcasts offer a potential solution because they provide authentic spoken English. Podcasts are produced for real audiences, encompassing diverse topics and natural speech patterns. They are accessible through digital platforms and can be replayed multiple times according to individual learner needs, allowing students to control their listening process, revisit challenging sections, and engage repeatedly with target vocabulary in context. These features make podcasts particularly suitable for developing both listening skills and contextual vocabulary mastery simultaneously.

The BBC Learning English - Real Easy English podcast, in particular, was selected for this study because it offers a balanced combination of authentic spoken English and accessible content for elementary to pre-intermediate learners. According to the BBC Learning English level classification, this series is categorized as Easy level, corresponding to A1-A2 (Elementary to Pre-intermediate) on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). Each episode features natural conversations between native speakers at a manageable pace, with clear pronunciation and contextualized vocabulary, and lasts approximately five minutes. The episodes are accompanied by complete transcripts

that support comprehension and vocabulary learning, and the transcripts are explicitly described as recordings of real, unscripted conversations rather than word-for-word scripts. Thus, for the purposes of this study, the podcast is categorized as an authentic spoken English podcast with pedagogical support, combining natural conversational features with learner-friendly accessibility.

Empirical evidence supports the effectiveness of podcasts in EFL learning contexts. Systematic exposure to varied oral input helps learners overcome key listening obstacles, including unfamiliar vocabulary and natural speech rate [1]. Repeated encounters with target vocabulary in authentic spoken English contexts have also been shown to consolidate recognition and support incidental vocabulary mastery, addressing the contextual dimension of lexical learning that conventional instruction often neglects. Several studies have provided empirical evidence supporting the use of podcasts in EFL listening instruction. Research has demonstrated that podcasts serve as a valuable medium for English language learning, particularly in developing listening skills and vocabulary mastery [4]. A study found that students who engaged with podcast-based instruction showed significant improvement in post-test results, with motivation and vocabulary mastery displaying notable gains [4]. Similarly, other studies have confirmed that students positively perceive podcasts as an effective medium for learning English, especially for practicing listening skills and supporting autonomous learning outside the classroom [5]. The use of podcasts has also been found to enhance students' motivation and familiarize them with authentic spoken English [6]. Furthermore, vocabulary mastery has consistently emerged as the primary benefit students perceive from podcast listening, suggesting that repeated exposure to authentic spoken English content through podcasts supports incidental vocabulary learning [5]. These findings collectively indicate that podcasts hold significant potential for addressing the listening and vocabulary challenges commonly faced by EFL students.

In addition to the studies mentioned above, several other studies have reported similar findings. A study involving 139 Iranian EFL learners examined the impact of three podcast series (All Ears English, Splendid English, and Coffee

Break English) on vocabulary mastery and speaking performance. The experimental groups were exposed to podcasts over 13 weeks, and the results showed that all podcast groups achieved significantly better outcomes than the control group in both vocabulary and speaking assessments [7]. Similarly, a study conducted in Ukraine with first-year university students using BBC Learning English podcasts found that the podcast-based approach attracted students' attention, increased their motivation, and improved listening comprehension when meaningful activities were designed around the podcasts [8]. The effectiveness of podcasts in listening comprehension was also confirmed in a study involving 60 Iraqi high school students, where the experimental group significantly outperformed the control group on the post-test ($p = 0.010$), and students reported positive perceptions toward podcast-based instruction [9]. These additional findings further reinforce the potential of podcasts as an effective instructional medium for EFL listening and vocabulary development.

Despite this growing body of evidence, limited studies have examined how podcast-based instruction facilitates contextual vocabulary mastery as a distinct dimension of lexical processing in listening. This study addresses that gap by simultaneously investigating podcast effects on both listening skills and contextual vocabulary mastery, with attention to how authentic spoken English input supports real-time lexical processing.

The study was conducted at SMAS Islam Diponegoro, involving Class XI B-1 as the control group and Class XI B-2 as the experimental group. Both classes demonstrated below-average performance in listening and vocabulary prior to the study, and podcasts had not been systematically integrated into English instruction at the school. This context provided a relevant and underexplored setting in which to examine whether podcast-based instruction could produce measurable improvements in the two targeted competencies.

Based on the foregoing discussion, this study aimed to investigate the effect of podcasts on listening skills and contextual vocabulary mastery among EFL students at SMAS Islam Diponegoro. Using a quasi-experimental non-equivalent

control group pretest-posttest design, the study seeks to determine whether podcast-based instruction produces statistically significant improvements in both competencies compared to conventional instruction. The findings are expected to contribute empirical evidence for the integration of digital audio media into EFL instruction at the secondary level in Indonesia.

1.2 Formulation of the Problem

Based on the educational concerns and research gaps identified above, the present study is guided by the following two research questions:

RQ1: Is there a significant difference in listening skills between EFL students who receive podcast-based instruction using BBC Learning English - Real Easy English and those who receive researcher-made audio-based instruction?

RQ2: Is there a significant difference in contextual vocabulary mastery between EFL students who receive podcast-based instruction using BBC Learning English - Real Easy English and those who receive researcher-made audio-based instruction?

1.3 Purpose of the Study

Aligned with the two research questions above, the present study has two purposes:

1. To examine whether there is a statistically significant difference in listening skills between EFL students who receive podcast-based instruction using BBC Learning English - Real Easy English and those who receive researcher-made audio-based instruction.

2. To examine whether there is a statistically significant difference in contextual vocabulary mastery between EFL students who receive podcast-based instruction using BBC Learning English - Real Easy English and those who receive researcher-made audio-based instruction.

1.4 Significance of the Study

The significance of the present study can be understood from two complementary perspectives: its theoretical contributions to the academic literature

in English language education, and its practical implications for teaching, learning, and educational policy at the secondary school level in Indonesia.

From a theoretical standpoint, this study contributes meaningfully to the field of English language education, and more specifically to the sub-field of technology-enhanced language learning (TELL). The theoretical significance of this research lies principally in its integrated educational design, which investigates the simultaneous development of listening skills and contextual vocabulary mastery through a single instructional intervention. The majority of prior studies examining the role of podcasts in language learning have adopted a single-focus approach, investigating either general listening or discrete vocabulary learning in isolation [10]. The present study, by contrast, treats listening skills and contextual vocabulary mastery as mutually reinforcing instructional outcomes that can be addressed together through sustained engagement with authentic spoken English. This integrated perspective reflects current thinking in communicative language teaching, which advocates for instructional approaches that mirror the complexity and authentic spoken English of real language use rather than fragmenting language skills into disconnected components [11]. This study also contributes to the growing body of educational research on the use of digital media in EFL instruction at the secondary school level in Indonesia. While the use of technology in language education has received increasing attention in recent years, empirical studies that employ a quasi-experimental pretest-posttest design to measure instructional effectiveness within Indonesian senior high school contexts remain relatively limited [12]. While previous studies such as Suseno have demonstrated listening gains through podcast use, the specific question of whether podcast-based instruction produces measurable gains in contextual vocabulary mastery as a separate dependent variable in an Indonesian senior high school context has not been rigorously tested [13].

From a practical standpoint, the findings of this study carry meaningful implications for English language teachers working at the senior high school level. The study provides evidence-based guidance on the feasibility and effectiveness of integrating podcasts into listening instruction as a supplementary instructional

resource. Understanding how podcast-based instruction can be organized to simultaneously address holistic listening understanding and the development of contextual vocabulary mastery equips teachers with concrete pedagogical strategies that are grounded in classroom research rather than anecdotal practice. This is particularly valuable in the Indonesian educational context, where teachers often face the challenge of preparing students for authentic spoken English communication while working within the constraints of fixed curricula, limited class time, and uneven access to diverse learning materials.

1.5 Scope and Limitation of the Study

This study was scoped around two dependent variables: students' listening skills and contextual vocabulary mastery. Listening skills referred to students' ability to comprehend oral English delivered at a natural pace, including identifying main ideas, recognizing specific information, and following the development of an oral message. Contextual vocabulary mastery referred to students' ability to recognize and correctly interpret the meaning of vocabulary items as they appear within authentic spoken English contexts, as distinct from isolated word-level memorization. The study did not examine other language skills such as speaking, writing, reading, grammar, or pronunciation, as these fall outside the defined scope of the present research problem.

The study was conducted at SMAS Islam Diponegoro, involving Class XI B-1 as the control group ($n = 36$) and Class XI B-2 as the experimental group ($n = 36$). The experimental group received podcast-based instruction using BBC Learning English - Real Easy English episodes over five instructional sessions. The control group received researcher-made audio-based instruction covering the same topics and target vocabulary over the same period. The selection of these classes was based on pre-observation findings during the researcher's teaching practice, which revealed below-KKM performance in both listening and vocabulary. The findings of this study are therefore most directly applicable to student populations with comparable educational backgrounds and are not intended to be generalized beyond similar contexts without further investigation.

In terms of methodology, this study employed a quantitative quasi-experimental non-equivalent control group pretest-posttest design. Data were collected exclusively through researcher-developed listening and vocabulary tests administered as pretests and parallel-form posttests. No supplementary qualitative instruments such as interviews, observation protocols, or attitude questionnaires were used in the main data collection.

Several limitations of this study must be acknowledged. First, the use of intact, non-randomly assigned classroom groups means that pre-existing differences between the two classes, despite pretest equivalence, cannot be entirely ruled out as potential confounds. Second, the instructional treatment spanned five sessions, which constitutes a relatively short intervention period; longer-term effects of podcast-based instruction on the two dependent variables remain unknown. Third, the study was conducted at a single school, which limits the generalizability of the findings. Fourth, the researcher served simultaneously as the teacher delivering the instructional treatment to both groups, which introduces a potential teacher-researcher effect that may have influenced student performance. Fifth, the contextual vocabulary test comprised only ten items, which, while adequate for the scope of this study, may not fully capture the breadth of students' contextual vocabulary knowledge. Sixth, the use of researcher-developed instruments, while validated through expert review and pilot testing, may limit external comparability with other studies that employ standardized or commercially developed listening and vocabulary assessments, making it difficult to directly compare the magnitude of learning gains across different research contexts. Seven, it should be noted that the podcast episodes used in the experimental group featured dialogue between two speakers, while the control group audio recordings were produced as monologues. However, this difference is acknowledged as a limitation, as the observed effects may be attributed to both the authenticity of the materials and the conversational format. These limitations should be taken into account when interpreting the findings and designing future studies in this area.