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Listening to Diverse English Voices through Podcasts

Traditionally, many English language teachers around the world have conformed to an English as a foreign language (EFL) model. In this model, they expose their students to the standard language norms of English-dominant nations, such as the United States and the United Kingdom. However, English learners do not only need language skills to communicate with native speakers from these nations. As globalization, technology, and migration bring people around the world into more frequent and sustained contact, learners also need to be able to engage with other speakers of English as an additional language. Therefore, a more appropriate model is English as an international language (EIL), which emphasizes users' ability to communicate with diverse global English users (Matsuda 2012). Proficient users of EIL need the ability to communicate with speakers from varied backgrounds, rather than near-native proficiency in one dialect.

Strong listening skills are especially essential to users of EIL because they must understand a wide range of accents and language varieties (Tsang 2019). Moreover, since students cannot expect to learn the norms of every global English variety, they need the ability to adapt to new varieties they have never heard before. To help students develop these abilities, teachers can use diverse listening materials that expose students to varied language models. In this article, we recommend podcasts as a rich source of diverse listening materials. Although we recommend using podcasts in intermediate- or advanced-level classes, with appropriate planning podcasts can be used even with beginner students. Below, we first explain what podcasts are and how they help students develop listening skills. Then, we describe strategies to include podcasts in listening lessons, based on our experiences in a listening course for first-year English major students at an Islamic university in Central Java, Indonesia. Finally, we share feedback from our students to offer recommendations for teachers interested in using podcasts in their own listening lessons and courses.

TEACHING WITH PODCASTS

Podcasts are audio recordings that can be streamed or downloaded for free. Anyone can produce a podcast and upload it onto a podcasting platform. Listeners then use podcast apps on their mobile phone, tablet, or computer to access individual episodes or subscribe and automatically receive new episodes (see Appendix 1 for a list of free podcasting apps). The widespread availability of podcasts makes them well suited for use with adolescent or adult learners who have access to their own device. Because the listening files are easy to find online, podcasts are especially useful when teaching online

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or when using a "flipped classroom model," where students are expected to complete listening, reading, or viewing activities outside class, then engage in interactive practice activities during class time (Ozdamli and Asiksoy 2016, 102).

Some podcasts are made specifically for language learners and offer brief audio lessons. These podcasts are helpful for learners' own self-study and for use in class (for ideas about using this type of podcast, see Hanks 2022). However, this article discusses a different type of podcast, where the audience is proficient English users. A benefit of using this type of podcast in English classes is that it provides authentic language models. Students hear natural language as it is used for global communication, rather than artificial or overly simplified language developed specifically for learners.

Moreover, when the speakers are diverse global English users, rather than native speakers, the language models presented in podcasts are particularly appropriate for English learners. Most native speakers learn English when they are quite young, while most learners are exposed to English in classrooms at an older age. Given these differences, it is unrealistic to expect learners to attain proficiency like that of a native speaker. They can, however, hope to achieve language levels resembling those of proficient speakers who speak English as an additional language. For this reason, podcasts featuring diverse global English users are well suited for English lessons. These podcasts offer examples of the English language norms of speakers from around the world. Using podcasts like these in class helps students develop the valuable ability to adapt to new language varieties as they listen (see

Appendix 2 for a list of podcasts from several global contexts).

The use of these podcasts has challenges, however. First, since the podcasts come from diverse global settings, the speakers may use vocabulary and reference concepts that are unfamiliar to your students. Second, since the podcasts are designed for proficient speakers, the language level may be too high for intermediate and even many advanced learners. Nevertheless, well-designed lessons can help students overcome these challenges.

In fact, our students faced these challenges when we used episodes of 22.33, a podcast sharing the experiences of participants in exchange programs sponsored by the U.S. Department of State. Most of our students were from Central Java and had had limited contact with people from outside of that region. They were quite curious to learn about new settings, but the content of the podcast episodes was new in terms of both vocabulary and contextual information. Additionally, our class was "Listening for General Communication," a course for first-year English majors, most of whom had high-intermediate proficiency. The language used in the podcasts was above students' independent listening level. The teaching strategies we discuss in the next section allowed us to successfully use podcasts despite these challenges.

TEACHING STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT THE USE OF PODCASTS

Though the 22.33 podcasts included settings that were unfamiliar to our students and used language above their independent listening level, our careful planning of instruction allowed us to successfully use podcasts in our

class. In this section, we share details about our approach with the hope that readers will be able to adapt our strategies to meet the needs of their own students. We designed listening lessons using the traditional pre-listening, while-listening, and post-listening sequence (Goh and Vandergrift 2022). Lessons for each podcast extended across two class sessions. The first session focused on pre-listening activities and introduced while-listening activities. Students then had time to listen to the podcasts and complete while-listening activities on their own between the two class sessions. In the second session, students shared their responses to while-listening activities and completed post-listening activities together. Below, we share examples of activity types and explain three key teaching strategies, each used at one stage in the process: (1) building and activating students' background knowledge during pre-listening activities; (2) offering instructional scaffolds during while-listening activities; and (3) intentionally fostering personal connections during post-listening activities. Although we discuss these strategies in relation to podcasts, they can also be used in the pre-, while-, and post-listening stages of lessons using any extended listening material.

Pre-listening Activities: Building and Activating Background Knowledge

Building and activating students' background knowledge supports learning by allowing students to make connections between new and old knowledge. This teaching strategy was essential because many of the podcasts discussed contexts and situations that were unfamiliar to our students. We built students' background knowledge by offering explanations and opportunities to learn about some of these new concepts. Our students were not starting from zero, however. They were university students with many life experiences they could use to help them understand new concepts. For that reason, we also made efforts to activate students' established background knowledge by leading them to reflect on past experiences and prior knowledge. We used the following activities

to build and activate students' background knowledge:

1. *Guided discussion*. We considered our students' prior life experiences and designed discussion questions that would help them remember and reflect on those experiences. For instance, students (all of whom were Muslim) shared their memories of celebrating Ramadan as a child before listening to a podcast about Ramadan practices around the world.

2. *Reflective writing*. Reflective-writing activities give students time to consider a complex question and formulate a response. Prompts might encourage students to think critically about an experience in their own lives or lead them to put themselves in someone else's shoes and consider new perspectives. For a podcast about a Canadian Muslim person, students were prompted to consider their preconceived notions about Canadians by completing sentences like, "When I imagine a person from Canada, I think of a person who looks like _____" and "When I imagine a person from Canada, I think of a person whose religion is _____."

3. *Pre-reading*. Reading a text related to themes in the podcast offers students an opportunity to gain new knowledge related to the context. We used short texts at accessible reading levels since the goal was to introduce new information, rather than develop or assess reading skills. In several lessons, we asked students to read the biography of the speaker in the podcast so they had some ideas about what to expect before listening.

4. *Scenarios*. A scenario activity asks students to imagine themselves in a new situation and complete a hypothetical task. This type of activity primes students to listen to content from new settings because they can consider the mindset of someone in that setting before listening.

Before listening to a 22.33 podcast about adapting to a new country or culture, we asked students to check off adaptation techniques they would try if they studied or worked abroad. Scenarios included "Live with roommates from the local community," "Volunteer at local organizations," and "Speak the local language with people in stores and restaurants." (See Figure 1 for a sample Adaptation Techniques chart.)

5. *Pre-teaching vocabulary*. For every podcast, we identified vocabulary that was challenging to students. We offered these words in a list and gave students time to research their meaning. We did this activity individually so that students could adapt their research to their own language abilities—they could look up words that were new to them, reconfirm the meaning of words they had some familiarity with, and skip words they knew well. We then asked students to form their own sentences using each word to check their comprehension.

While-listening Activities: Offering Instructional Scaffolds

After completing pre-listening activities, students were better prepared to listen to the podcasts. We did not simply assign entire podcasts for students to listen to on their own, however. Doing so would likely have led to frustration because the language used in the podcasts was above our students' independent listening level, particularly when the language variety of the speaker was new to students. To overcome this challenge, we offered instructional scaffolds to support students as they listened to the podcasts. Instructional scaffolds are supports developed and provided by teachers that allow students to complete tasks they would be unable to do on their own (Huong 2003). As students gain experience, build skills, and reach learning objectives, they will no longer need the support. At that point, teachers can gradually remove the scaffolds or provide fewer of them and move on to more-complex skills and tasks. Here are examples of instructional

scaffolds we used to help students listen successfully to the podcasts:

1. *Shorten the podcast*. Many of the podcasts we used (and those we recommend in Appendix 2) are ten minutes or longer. Listening to such long audio recordings can lead students to lose focus and feel overwhelmed. In many lessons, we asked students to listen to short portions of the podcast.

2. *Listen repeatedly*. The option to repeat the audio is a major benefit of listening to recorded content. In some lessons, we asked students to listen to a portion of the audio up to three times. Each time, we encouraged students to listen in a different way, for instance noting new vocabulary words or phrases the first time, then keeping notes so they could retell the speaker's story to a partner, then finally listening for additional information that neither they nor their partner mentioned previously. We also encouraged students to listen to podcasts (or portions of podcasts) as many times as they needed when listening independently.

3. *Slow down the audio*. Podcast apps offer the option to play audio at slower speeds. A slower pace can be helpful to students, especially if the speaker talks quite quickly. For some podcasts, when we wanted students to listen for specific information, we played the audio at a slower speed so they could listen more carefully and take more time to process what they were hearing. We also informed students about the option to listen at slower speeds so they could change the speed as needed when listening on their own.

4. *Simple tasks*. Students listen more carefully when they have a focused goal. Giving them tasks to complete while listening helps them find specific information in the podcast. We assigned tasks like putting a series of events

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in order; checking off information the speaker mentioned; and marking statements true or false. Whatever the task, be sure it is not too complex—overly difficult tasks may distract students from the listening content!

5. *Guiding questions.* Another way to offer students a focused goal is to provide questions to guide their listening. These questions allowed our students to be attentive as they looked for the answers. In our questions, we tried to use the same vocabulary as that used in the podcast so that students would have keywords to listen for. We typically started with simple questions and moved to increasingly complex questions that required critical thinking, such as asking why a situation was especially funny or meaningful to the speaker.

6. *Graphic organizers.* Organizing information in a chart, table, or picture helps students process content more quickly. Typically, we included some information (such as the speakers' names or home countries) in the organizer so that students could confirm their understanding and focus on adding new information. We found graphic organizers especially helpful for podcasts where there were multiple speakers because students sometimes found it difficult to distinguish between similar voices. Completing a graphic organizer with information about each speaker helped students keep track of who was speaking and see the similarities and differences in their stories.

Post-listening Activities: Intentionally Fostering Personal Connections

The final portion of our lessons was devoted to post-listening activities. We designed these activities to help students develop personal connections with the content of the podcasts. Personal connections offer a foundation for meaningful learning and skill development, but these connections do not always happen automatically. In fact, many teachers skip these types of activities altogether; after engaging in while-listening activities, they might simply confirm students' comprehension before moving on. We intentionally developed post-listening activities that connected students' background knowledge (which we activated during the pre-listening) and the content of the listening materials (which were the focus of while-listening activities). Therefore, the post-listening activities brought the other elements of the lesson together and offered a culmination to the lesson and to students' learning. These activities allowed students to make connections between their own experiences and language use and those of the speakers from around the world whose experiences had been shared in the podcasts. We used the following activity types during the post-listening portion of our lessons:

1. *Vocabulary review.* To follow up on our pre-teaching of vocabulary, we took time for students to discuss the vocabulary that was new to them during the podcasts. They often identified words and phrases that we had not anticipated to cause difficulty. In many cases, students were familiar with the words' meaning, but were able to identify new aspects of the way those words were used, such as collocations (words that frequently

appear together), idiomatic usage, and different meanings in new contexts.

2. *Guided discussion.* As in the pre-listening portion of the lesson, we used carefully designed questions to prompt students to think critically and make connections between their own experiences and those of the speakers in the podcasts. These discussions offered opportunities for students to reconsider any preconceived notions they might have had about the content of the podcasts and practice keeping an open mind when learning about a new context.

3. *Action planning.* Many of the 22.33 podcasts touch on social issues, such as gender equality, access for people with disabilities, and conflict resolution. Learning about these issues in a new context gave students an opportunity to consider the status of these issues in their own societies with fresh eyes. We asked students to consider ways that they could learn from the experiences of the speakers in the podcasts. Students brainstormed and discussed actions they could take to change their own societies for the better.

4. *Writing and speaking prompts.* Though our class was primarily focused on listening, we adopted an integrated skills approach and used the listening activities as prompts to also practice language production through writing and speaking. Writing prompts could ask

students to write an email they would send to the speaker or to write a tweet sharing the podcast episode with others. Speaking prompts could ask students to prepare questions they would ask the speaker if they met them or to share an anecdote about a personal experience similar to that of the speaker.

SAMPLE LESSON

In many sessions, we used several of the activities described above at each stage in the lesson. To explain how activities at these three stages were used together, we will share an example of one complete lesson using the 22.33 podcast episode "The barefoot route of Rūta," which focuses on the experiences of a young Lithuanian woman who lived for a year in Washington, D.C., while participating in a professional internship program focused on human rights. The podcast describes how Rūta adapted to life in the United States and her work related to freedom of expression. This podcast exposed students to a Lithuanian speaker of English, whose language norms few or none of them had encountered previously, so the key teaching strategies described above were essential for students to listen successfully.

In the pre-listening stage, we built student background knowledge by asking students to look up Lithuania on a map and complete a short *pre-reading* that shared background details about the speaker. Students participated in a short *scenario activity* where they imagined what it would be like to live

Adaptation Techniques	I would do this	Rūta did this
A. Live with roommates from the local community		
B. Get a job		
C. Volunteer at local organizations		
D. Speak the local language with people in stores and restaurants		
E. Join a recreational sports league		
F. Attend public events		
G. Introduce yourself to people at events		

Figure 1. Adaptation Techniques chart used in sample lesson

in another country and culture for a year. We gave students a chart of adaptation techniques they might use in that situation (see Figure 1), and they participated in a *guided discussion* about which three techniques would be most helpful. Lastly, we *pre-taught vocabulary* by giving students a list of potentially unfamiliar words and phrases (e.g., "rule of law," "news junkie") from the podcast. Students looked up words and phrases that were new to them and shared sentences using each word/phrase to confirm their understanding.

In the while-listening phase, students first listened to the whole podcast. During this first listen, they were asked to listen for which adaptation techniques Rūta used in order to adapt to her new context, then complete a *simple task* by checking off which adaptation techniques she used in the final column of the *graphic organizer* in Figure 1. This activity allowed students to build basic familiarity with the overall themes in the podcast. Next, we *shortened the podcast* by identifying three brief sections and asked students to *listen repeatedly* to those sections to answer sets of *guiding questions*. The questions were designed to move from simple to complex. For instance, one portion of the podcast involved Rūta telling a story about being locked out of her house with no shoes on, a situation that had given her bad dreams in the past. She jokingly used the phrase "My dreams came true in America," and the final question asked students to explain two senses in which this phrase was true. Because understanding humor requires both linguistic and sociolinguistic knowledge, this question required sophisticated critical-thinking skills.

During the post-listening phase, we *reviewed vocabulary* by asking students to share words,

phrases, or uses that were new to them. In response to a statement by Rūta—"I have this Lithuanian heart, but my mind is a global mind"—students participated in a *guided discussion* about which parts of their identity they consider Indonesian and which they consider global. Lastly, students reconsidered the Adaptation Techniques chart in Figure 1 and made an *action plan* to use when adjusting to new contexts in the future.

STUDENT RESPONSES AND LESSONS LEARNED

We found podcasts to be an effective listening source that exposed students to diverse global voices, and we believe English teachers around the world could use these materials in their classes. We requested student feedback on our use of the podcasts through a survey and an in-class discussion at the end of the semester. In this section, we draw on this feedback to offer suggestions for teachers using podcasts in their classroom in other teaching contexts.

First, we recommend choosing podcasts that feature a wide range of global English speakers. Doing so helps students develop the ability to adapt to language varieties they have never encountered before. In our increasingly globalized world, that ability is more valuable than high proficiency in any one dialect. The speakers in the podcasts should be proficient in English to offer a good language model to students, but they do not need to conform to a native-speaker variety. In fact, many of our students found it easier to listen to nonnative speakers. One student said, "For me personally, listening to speakers who use English as their additional language is easier than native speakers because we are both learning, so we can have some similarities

in pronunciation, or use general words." Moreover, listening to highly proficient speakers who use English as an additional language offers students a more accessible language model since English learners can never become native speakers, but they can hope to gain high proficiency in English.

Building on the recommendation to expose students to diverse varieties of English, we also suggest that teachers help students develop the ability to identify distinctions among varieties. Though our students appreciated hearing speakers of English as an additional language, many also framed the variation they encountered as a challenge. For instance, as one student noted, "The speakers have so many accents, and it's difficult to understand what they say." Our students found it difficult to distinguish between language features that reveal linguistic diversity and features that are standard across varieties but new to them. To respond to this challenge, teachers could explain in the pre-listening phase the distinguishing features of a given variety and share clear examples. Once students have some awareness of the distinct features of a language variety, they can be encouraged to seek out these features during while-listening activities. For instance, teachers could give *guiding questions* specifically focused on linguistic variation, such as:

- What is unique about the speaker's accent?

- How does the speaker's vocabulary use reflect their cultural background?

- Does the speaker use a formal or an informal style, and why might that be?

- How is the speaker's cultural background reflected in the pragmatic aspects of their language use (e.g., the way they make requests, restate ideas, or express doubt)?

These are challenging questions even for advanced learners, so it is particularly important to use instructional scaffolds like *shortening the podcast, listening repeatedly,* and

slowing down the audio as students explore linguistic variation.

In addition to raising students' awareness of global language varieties, podcasts help students gain insight into a wide variety of global cultures and offer them the opportunity to experience a new culture through their mobile devices. The many podcasts available from communities around the world (including those listed in Appendix 2) offer teachers an opportunity to build students' intercultural competence by exposing them to unfamiliar cultures. Intercultural competence allows students to engage with people from different cultures with tolerance, respect, and curiosity (Byram and Wagner 2018). We found that our students really enjoyed being exposed to different perspectives. One student said, "The experience of listening to podcasts can help us get to know the culture of other countries and the experiences of others."

Though exposure to new cultures is a benefit of listening to podcasts, we also suggest choosing podcasts related to familiar themes. If a podcast focuses on unfamiliar topics in an unfamiliar setting, students may feel totally lost! Especially when teachers use podcasts for the first time with a particular class, it can be helpful to select a podcast related to students' interests, experiences, or prior knowledge. When we asked our students (again, all of whom were Muslim) which podcast they had enjoyed most, 40 percent chose a podcast about how Ramadan was celebrated around the world, 19 percent chose a podcast about a Canadian Imam, and 15 percent chose a podcast about an exchange participant who had studied in Indonesia. One student explained these preferences: "These podcasts relate to us. So, the experiences of the interviewees relate to our lives." Podcasts with themes of interest to students help keep their motivation to listen even when the podcasts discuss an unfamiliar cultural context.

Lastly, we encourage teachers to use podcasts with their students in class so that they learn how to access podcasts on their own. At the

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beginning of the semester, we were concerned that students would have difficulty accessing the podcasts, but we did not find that to be the case. Students found podcasts quite convenient and appealing. As one student noted, "You can listen to podcasts for free anywhere and anytime." This benefit of podcasts makes them a good resource to use for teaching, but also a good resource for students' continued self-study. Students can explore the many podcasts available online to find content specifically related to their own hobbies and interests. After using podcasts with students in class, we recommend asking students to find and listen to other podcasts on their own. The teacher could follow up periodically by asking students in class for podcast recommendations and asking what interesting podcasts they have listened to recently.

Overall, our students seemed to appreciate the use of podcasts in our course. One student said, "Listening to podcasts was very fun, and I really enjoyed it." The podcasts exposed them to authentic language use by global English users and offered an appropriate model for their own language learning. Podcasts are highly appropriate listening materials to prepare students to use EIL in the future.

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APPENDIX 1

Free Podcasting Apps

- **Acast.** Acast offers access to most podcast streams as well as hosting to podcast creators.
- **Anchor.** Anchor can be used to access and create podcasts. It also has an easy-to-use web-browser interface so you can share individual podcast episodes through a link.
- **Apple Podcasts.** This app is available only on Apple devices and is a convenient option for iPhone, iPad, and Mac users.
- **Google Podcasts.** The homepage on Google Podcasts can help users find new podcasts of interest by sharing latest trends and grouping podcasts by genre.
- **Pocket Casts.** This app has an easy-to-use interface and makes it easy to subscribe to podcasts and create playlists.

APPENDIX 2

Podcasts from Global Contexts

Podcast Title	Context	Description
22.33	Global	The 22.33 podcast was produced by the U.S. Department of State from 2018 to 2021. It shares the stories of participants in exchange programs and tells how their lives were impacted by their international experiences.
The Europeans	Europe	The Europeans podcast discusses politics and culture in Europe. It features interviews with interesting people from across the continent and tells stories that are not covered elsewhere.
Global Voices	Global	The Global Voices podcast shares local perspectives from around the world and discusses how those local stories relate to wider global themes.
Rough Translation	Global	The Rough Translation podcast shares stories from around the world and highlights the similarities that exist even across great differences.
Sound Africa	Africa	The Sound Africa podcast seeks to advance social justice by telling the stories of everyday people across Africa. These stories often reflect unknown aspects of current events.
Voices of Exchange	Global	The Voices of Exchange podcast is produced by the U.S. Department of State. It features interviews with exchange-program participants. Participants share details about their lives and international experiences.