

# THE EFFECTS OF PODCASTS ON ESL SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS' LISTENING SKILLS, MOTIVATION, AND ENGAGEMENT

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## ABSTRACT

This study aims to investigate the effects of podcasts on ESL secondary school students' listening skills, motivation, and engagement. There are two objectives of this study which are to determine the change in ESL students' listening skills from before and after using podcasts and to assess ESL secondary school students' motivation and engagement in listening activities after using podcasts by 31 secondary school students of SMK Inanam, Inanam, Sabah. In this single-group pre-post experimental design, the data were collected through a pre- and post-intervention survey adapted from Pratiwi et al. (2024). Results revealed a significant improvement in listening skills, with the mean score increasing from 3.28 to 3.64. Their views on Podcasts also improved by 0.32 from 3.59 to 4.02 in mean values. Students also reported a high perceived level of motivation and engagement with the mean of 3.98, reflecting positive attitudes towards podcast use. This study implies that integrating podcasts can significantly enrich ESL instruction, creating a more dynamic and student-centered environment that fosters improved language acquisition.

**Keyword(s):** *podcasts, ESL secondary school students, listening skills, motivation, engagement*

## INTRODUCTION

In today's generation, the use of digital tools for teaching and learning in schools has been increasing where these tools enhance students' learning and educators' teaching methods. The use of technology allows language teachers to add a range of authentic resources and interactive exercises that can boost learners' engagement and motivation (Uzun, 2023). Moreover, the accessibility of software tools and multimedia resources has simplified the process of creating engaging listening exercises that can accommodate the varying needs and preferences of students.

The four main skills that need to be taught to students when learning the English language are listening, speaking, reading and writing (Sukmawati & Eka, 2018, as cited in Sabrila & Apoko, 2022). Listening, in particular, is foundational as it is needed in the development of the other three skills. Effective listening skills enable students to understand spoken language, in this case, the English language. In addition, if someone has the skill for listening, they can have effective communication with others (Rullu, 2022). Thus, this particular skill is important as it is used for

communication and further language learning. Traditionally, teaching listening skills relied on educators reading texts aloud or playing pre-recorded audio clips that are provided with the textbooks. Other traditional ways of teaching listening skills include cassettes, CDs, DVDs and vinyl (Harahap, 2020). While these methods have benefits, students are not engaged, causing them to lack motivation and have limited attention spans during listening activities.

To counter these challenges, digital tools that show promise, such as podcasts, have emerged. Podcasts offer several benefits compared to traditional methods. One of the benefits is that it can cater to different types of learning styles of students. Another benefit is that it can provide authentic language models. Other than that, using podcasts can create immersive learning experiences that enhance the comprehension and retention of students. Thus, through the use of technology, teachers or educators can assist students by using podcasts to enhance their listening skills, motivation, and engagement.

This study aims to investigate the effects of podcasts on ESL secondary students' in enhancing their listening skills, motivation, and engagement. There is a lack of information on the effects of podcasts on ESL secondary students' listening skills, motivation, and engagement, which is what this study sought to contribute to. This research was conducted with two objectives:

1. To determine the change in ESL secondary school students' perceptions of their listening skills and views towards Podcast,
2. To identify the ESL secondary students' perception of their motivation and engagement in listening activities after using podcasts.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Podcasts have emerged as a highly effective multimedia tool in enhancing English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students' listening comprehension, alongside showing results where their motivation and engagement were significantly boosted in language learning. The impact that was found using podcasts can be understood more by considering their alignment with key psychological needs for motivation, as stated in Self-Determination Theory (SDT), and their capacity to manage cognitive processing according to Cognitive Load Theory (CLT).

Multiple studies have proved the direct positive correlation between the integration of podcasts and improved listening skills. For example, a study by Abdulrahman et al. (2018) showed that EFL students who utilized podcasts as listening materials exhibited marked improvements in their listening comprehension compared to those who were taught in a more traditional learning setting. This enhancement is caused partly by the unique features of podcasts that manage one of the loads in CLT, the intrinsic cognitive load (Sweller, 1991, as cited in Asma & Dallel, 2020). Compared to passive listening experiences, podcasts allow learners to have control over playback features such as pausing, rewinding, and relistening to challenging segments. This flexibility enables students to break down complex linguistic information, such as new vocabulary or intricate sentence structures, into manageable chunks, thereby reducing the burden on the students' memories and facilitating more effective processing. The ability to control podcasts also fosters a crucial sense of autonomy, a core psychological need identified by Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), as students feel empowered in directing their own learning pace and engagement with the listening material.

Beyond skill improvement, podcasts serve as a powerful tool for enhancing students' engagement and intrinsic motivation as well. Abdulrahman et al. (2018) stated that the students who utilised podcasts have significantly higher motivation, which was caused by engaging features like authentic content, flexible listening pace, and diverse topics that made learning

enjoyable and personally relevant. This was also supported by Rabie (2023), who showed that incorporating podcasts led to substantial increases in motivation among EFL secondary students. In addition, the students perceived podcasts as an effective and easy-to-use tool that employed authentic language. The dynamic nature of audio content and its connection to real-life situations encourage critical and creative thinking, enabling students to visualize scenarios that they hear from the podcasts and promote problem-solving skills.

More importantly, the engaging and authentic nature of podcast content contributes to a reduction in extraneous cognitive load (CLT). When students are genuinely interested and invested when learning, their attention is less likely to be diverted by non-essential elements or inefficient instructional design of the lesson, allowing mental effort to be directed more effectively towards understanding the language. The podcasts that focus only on audio also minimize visual distractions, further supporting focused linguistic processing and fostering a sense of competence (SDT) as learners successfully comprehend authentic English.

Furthermore, learner autonomy, a fundamental principle of Self-Determination Theory, is profoundly supported by podcasts. A study by Gonulal (2020) highlighted that the freedom students had to choose their own podcasts significantly increased their enjoyment and engagement. This choice directly addresses the SDT need for autonomy, allowing students to engage with content relevant to their interests, thereby boosting intrinsic motivation. This self-directed engagement is vital for fostering germane cognitive load (CLT), which involves the productive mental effort students expend to integrate new linguistic knowledge with existing schemata. When students can connect new vocabulary, structures, and pronunciations to their prior knowledge and interests through personally selected topics, it promotes the formation of a robust mental framework for language acquisition.

Gonulal (2020) also stated that extensive listening to podcasts led to improved listening fluency and pronunciation, further demonstrating how consistent exposure to authentic language, driven by the students' choice and engagement, optimizes germane load. Consequently, by strategically optimizing cognitive load (CLT) and fulfilling fundamental psychological needs for autonomy and competence (SDT), podcasts provide a rich learning environment that maximizes productive mental effort for effective EFL listening acquisition.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The research design employed in this study is a quantitative approach using a single-group pre-survey post-survey design. Conducting a quantitative approach is a fundamental method where decisions are based on evidence. Its significance is immense because its methods offer empirical precision, allowing academics, industry professionals, and government policymakers to extract practical insights from data (Lim, 2024). Thus, this approach is the most suitable to conduct studies about the effects of using podcasts on ESL secondary school students' listening skills, motivation, and engagement.

This sample of this study included thirty-one secondary school students. The participant group comprised a balance of both male and female students, representing a range of English proficiency levels from intermediate to advanced. Students with different academic backgrounds and English proficiency, with their willingness to participate also being a key factor.

Data was collected through a digital survey administered via Google Forms. This approach was selected as the most suitable method for efficiently collecting quantitative data on ESL secondary school students' listening skills, motivation, and engagement. The instrument was adapted from Pratiwi et. Al. (2024) and modified to suit the secondary school setting. The pre-

intervention questionnaire featured three sections in Table 1: Section A: Demographic Information, Section B, Current Listening Skills, which assesses students' self-perceived listening abilities in English, and the last section, Section C, Views Towards Podcasts, was designed to gauge students' prior experience with and attitudes towards podcasts in general.

**Table 1:** Pre-Intervention Questionnaire

Item	Statement	
SECTION B: PERCEPTIONS ON LISTENING SKILL		SECTION C: VIEWS TOWARDS PODCASTS
1	I can understand the main idea when listening to spoken English.	I know what a podcast is.
2	I can follow classroom instructions in English without much difficulty.	I have listened to a podcast before.
3	I find it easy to understand English conversations in audio recordings.	I think podcasts can help improve my English listening skills.
4	I struggle to catch specific details when listening to English	I feel interested in trying podcasts for learning English.
5	I can understand different English accents when listening.	I prefer listening to audio materials compared to reading texts.
6	I need to listen several times to understand an English audio.	I think podcasts can make listening lessons more enjoyable.
7	I feel confident about my English listening skills.	I believe using podcasts will keep me focused during listening activities.
8	I can guess the meaning of unfamiliar words when listening to English.	I expect that podcasts will help me understand English speakers better.
9	I find it difficult to stay focused during English listening tasks	I am confident that I can follow and understand a podcast in English.
10	I understand more when audio includes visuals or context clues.	I think podcasts could make learning English more interesting.

The post-intervention questionnaire has similar constructs but is adapted to reflect students' experiences during the podcast-based lessons. Section B focused on perceptions of listening skills specifically in relation to the podcast tasks, while Section C assessed their views on the usefulness, enjoyability, and effectiveness of using podcasts for English learning. An additional Section D with 10 items measured students' motivation and engagement during the

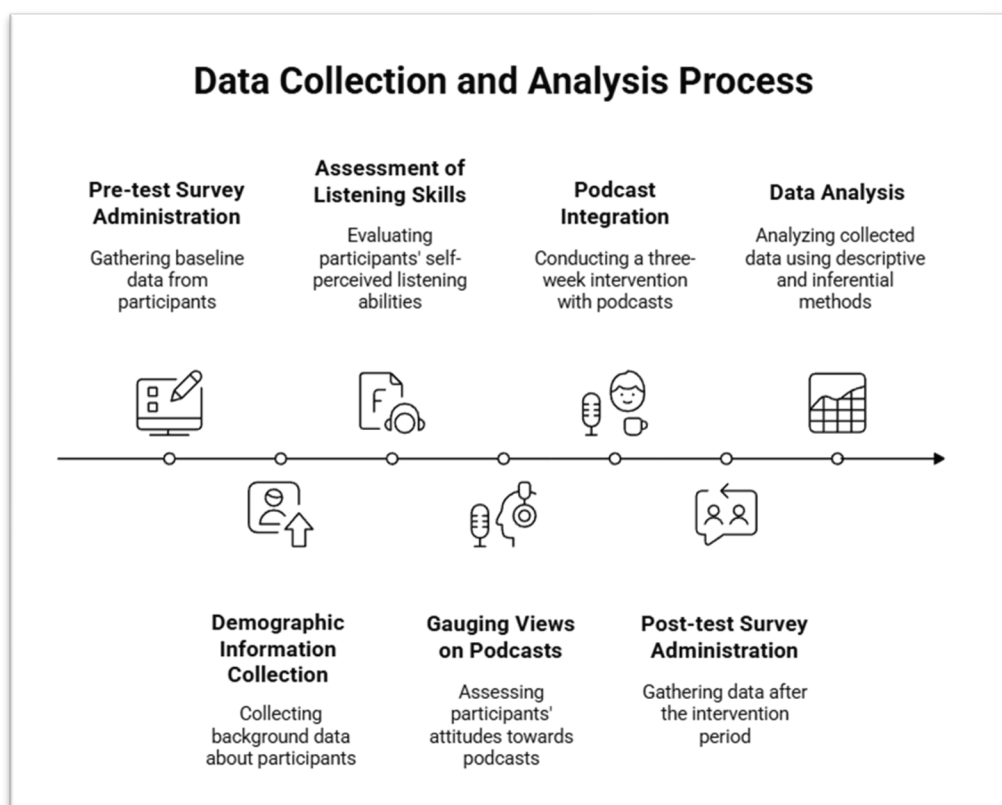
podcast activities. All items were rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree).

**Table 2:** Pre-Intervention Questionnaire

Item	Statement	
SECTION B: PERCEPTIONS ON LISTENING SKILL		SECTION C: VIEWS TOWARDS PODCASTS
1	I can understand the main idea when listening to an English podcast.	I think podcasts are useful for improving my English listening skills.
2	I could follow the classroom instructions during the podcast activity without much difficulty.	I enjoy listening to podcasts as a learning activity.
3	I found it easy to understand English conversations in the podcast.	Podcasts make learning English more interesting.
4	I struggled to catch specific details while listening to the podcast.	I feel more motivated to learn when using podcasts.
5	I could understand the speaker's accent in the podcast.	Podcasts are easier to understand than textbook audio materials.
6	I needed to reply to parts of the podcast to understand the message.	I would like to use podcasts more often in English lessons.
7	I feel more confident about my listening skills after listening to a podcast.	Podcasts help me understand different accents and ways of speaking.
8	I could guess the meaning of unfamiliar words while listening to the podcast.	I feel confident learning English through podcasts.
9	I found it difficult to stay focused during the podcast listening task.	Podcasts can help me improve my vocabulary and pronunciation.
10	I understood more when the podcast gave examples or explained the topic clearly.	Podcasts help me focus better during listening activities.
SECTION D: MOTIVATION AND ENGAGEMENT		
I felt interested in the podcast lesson.		
I was focused throughout the podcast activity.		
I wanted to understand the podcast because it sounded interesting.		

I found myself trying harder to listen carefully during the podcast.
The podcast made the listening lesson more enjoyable.
I felt motivated to participate in follow-up activities after listening.
I paid more attention because I liked the podcast content.
I would like to use podcasts in future English lessons.
Listening to the podcast helped me stay engaged from start to finish.
I felt more confident in my listening skills after the podcast lesson.

This study also involved a three-week intervention with Podcasts during English lessons, with 2 sessions conducted weekly. In all the listening sessions, at least 2 podcasts were played. For instance, in Week 2, *should zoos exist? - What in the World* podcast, *BBC World Service (BBC World Service)*, and *Friendship Frustrations, Advice Session (Emma Chamberlain)* were played. Figure 1 summarizes the data collection and analysis for this study.



**Figure 1:** Data Collection and Analysis Process

Responses were collected and systematically organized with strict confidentiality protocols in place. Each response was anonymized and securely stored to prevent association with individual participants. Both pre-intervention and post-intervention surveys also included asking for consent, clear instructions, confidentiality and anonymity, and reminders that the surveys would not affect the students' grades. The data collected were analyzed using descriptive analysis and an inferential analysis (paired-sample t-test).

## FINDINGS

The study aimed to investigate the effects of podcasts on ESL secondary school students' listening skills, views on podcasts, motivation, and engagement.

### *ESL Secondary School Students' Perceptions of Their Listening Skills with the Podcast Intervention*

Table 1 presents students' self-perceived listening skills before and after the intervention, which generally fell into the moderate to moderately good range, according to the 5-point Likert scale. The highest mean score was for Item 1, "I can understand the main idea when listening to spoken English" ( $M=4.03$ ,  $SD=0.75$ ), suggesting that students felt relatively confident in grasping the general gist of spoken English. Conversely, students reported a lower perceived ability in Item 9, "I find it difficult to stay focused during English listening tasks" ( $M=2.71$ ,  $SD=1.10$ ) and Item 4, "I struggle to catch specific details when listening to English" ( $M=2.90$ ,  $SD=0.97$ ), indicating these areas were perceived as more challenging before the intervention.

**Table 1:** Students' Perceptions on Listening Skills before and after Podcast Intervention

Question	Pre		Post	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
1	4.03	0.75	4.10	0.65
2	3.58	0.80	3.97	0.70
3	3.42	0.84	3.87	0.71
4	2.90	0.97	2.94	0.81
5	3.23	0.88	3.90	0.65
6	3.29	1.03	3.13	0.99
7	3.35	0.83	3.94	0.68
8	2.90	0.87	3.74	0.72
9	2.71	1.10	3.00	1.12
10	3.45	1.21	3.90	0.74

The descriptive statistics for students' self-perceived listening skills after the podcast intervention is also presented. Overall, there was a noticeable increase in positive perceptions compared to the pre-survey mean values. The highest mean was observed for Item 1, "I can understand the main idea when listening to an English podcast," ( $M=4.10$ ,  $SD=0.65$ ), indicating strong confidence in grasping the main points. Similarly, high means were found for Item 2, "I could follow the classroom instructions during the podcast activity without much difficulty," ( $M=3.97$ ) and Item 7,



"I feel more confident about my listening skills after listening to a podcast." ( $M=3.94$ ,  $SD=0.68$ ), suggesting increased ease and self-assurance in listening tasks.

Despite the general improvement, some areas still present challenges. The lowest mean was for Item 4, "I struggled to catch specific details while listening to the podcast," ( $M=2.94$ ,  $SD=0.81$ ) and Item 9, "I found it difficult to stay focused during the podcast listening task," ( $M=3.00$ ,  $SD=1.12$ ). These mean values, although slightly higher than their pre-survey counterparts, still indicate that students continued to perceive difficulties with detailed comprehension and maintaining focus during podcast listening.

**Table 2:** Students' Views towards Podcast before and after Podcast Intervention

Question	Pre		Post	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
1	3.87	0.88	4.29	0.83
2	3.94	0.89	4.26	0.63
3	3.81	0.87	4.23	0.72
4	3.65	0.88	4.06	0.73
5	3.32	0.88	3.74	0.82
6	3.81	0.87	3.71	0.78
7	3.58	0.77	4.00	0.68
8	3.65	0.76	3.81	0.70
9	3.42	0.77	4.16	0.64
10	3.94	0.68	3.97	0.66

Table 2 presents findings on students' views on Podcasts. Before the intervention, students' views on podcasts generally fell in the moderate to moderately good range. They reported good foundational awareness and prior experience with podcasts, as shown by high agreement with items such as "I know what a podcast is" ( $M=3.87$ ) and "I have listened to a podcast before" ( $M=3.94$ ), as well as positive expectations for engagement, e.g., "Podcasts could make learning English more interesting" ( $M=3.94$ ). Lower initial agreement was observed for preferences for audio over text (3.32) and confidence in understanding podcasts in English (3.42). After the intervention, students' self-perceived listening skills improved noticeably, with the highest agreement for understanding main ideas in podcasts ( $M=4.10$ ), following classroom instructions ( $M=3.97$ ), and feeling more confident about listening skills ( $M=3.94$ ). However, some challenges remained, particularly in catching specific details ( $M=2.94$ ) and maintaining focus during listening tasks ( $M=3.00$ ), indicating that detailed comprehension and sustained attention continued to be areas of moderate difficulty.

A paired-samples t-test indicated in Table 3 shows significant improvements in students' self-perceived listening skills and their views toward podcasts following the intervention. Listening skills increased from a pre-intervention mean of 3.28 to a post-intervention mean of 3.64,  $t(30) = 3.66$ ,  $p < .001$ , with a mean difference of 0.36 and a medium effect size (Cohen's  $d = 0.54$ ). Similarly, students' views on podcasts improved from 3.69 to 4.02,  $t(30) = 3.02$ ,  $p = .005$ , with a mean difference of 0.32 and a medium-to-large effect size (Cohen's  $d = 0.60$ ). These findings suggest that the podcast intervention was effective in enhancing both listening skills and students' positive perceptions of podcasts as a learning tool.



**Table 3:** Changes in Students' Perceptions towards Listening Skills and Views towards Podcast before and after Podcast Intervention

Variable Pair	Mean (Pre)	SD (Pre)	Mean (Post)	SD (Post)	Mean Difference	t	df	p	Cohen's d
Pre- vs. Post-Listening Skills	3.28	0.49	3.64	0.36	+0.36	3.66	30	< .001	0.54
Pre- vs. Post-Views on Podcasts	3.69	0.56	4.02	0.55	+0.32	3.02	30	.005	0.60

***ESL Secondary Students' Perception of Their Motivation and Engagement in Listening Activities After Using Podcasts***

Table 4 presents the descriptive statistics for students' motivation and engagement levels after participating in the podcast activities. The results generally indicate very high levels of motivation and engagement. The highest mean score was for Item 3, "I wanted to understand the podcast because it sounded interesting." with the mean of 4.26 and the standard deviation of 0.729, which strongly suggests that the content's appeal was a primary driver for engagement. Other highly rated items include Item 1, "I felt interested in the podcast lesson." with the mean of 4.16 and the standard deviation of 0.860 and Item 5, "The podcast made the listening lesson more enjoyable." with the mean of 4.16 and the standard deviation of 0.77, highlighting the enjoyable and stimulating nature of the podcast method.

**Table 4:** Students' Perceptions towards Their Motivation and Engagement

Question	Pre	
	Mean	SD
1	4.16	0.86
2	3.97	0.79
3	4.26	0.73
4	3.90	0.94
5	4.16	0.78
6	3.81	0.75
7	4.00	0.86
8	3.81	0.75
9	3.84	0.74
10	3.87	0.67

Even the lowest mean scores, such as for Item 6, "I felt motivated to participate in follow-up activities after listening (M = 3.81, SD = 0.75), and Item 8, "I would like to use podcasts in future English lessons." (M=3.81, SD=0.75) still falls into the above neutral to high perceived level range. This indicates a consistent and strong positive response across all aspects of motivation and engagement, further supporting the overall high mean for the composite motivation and engagement score.

## DISCUSSION

This study has proven that podcasts have positive effects on ESL secondary school students' perceptions of their listening skills, views on Podcasts, motivation, and engagement. This study is aligned with research where they discovered that incorporating podcasts into the curriculum did lead to significant improvements in not only speaking but also listening. Past research also proved that listening skills with extensive listening using podcasts and podcasts, can be improved. They discovered that the college-level EFL students' enjoyment and engagement increased due to their choosing their own podcasts. Students also became "motivationally engaged" when podcasts were used during their listening and speaking activities. (Rabie, 2023; Abdulrahman et al., 2018; Gonulal, 2020)

These positive findings can be explained more deeply through the lens of Cognitive Load Theory (CLT), where podcasts can be seen as instrumental in optimizing cognitive processes involved in listening. By providing information in an organized and understandable way, podcasts can help manage extraneous cognitive load, which means the mental effort caused by inefficient instructional design. This allows students to focus more on their intrinsic load, which is the inherent complexity of the listening material, and facilitates Germane load, the productive mental effort needed to integrate new listening knowledge with existing schemata (Sweller, 1991, as cited in Asma & Dallel, 2020). The ability to pause, replay, and control the pace of listening, inherent in podcasts, likely contributes to this optimization, enabling students to process information effectively and thus enhance their comprehension.

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) can demonstrate that the satisfaction of innate psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness is fundamental for fostering intrinsic motivation and engagement (Deci & Ryan, 1985). The generally high mean, 3.98, of motivation and engagement supported the fulfillment of these needs for ESL secondary students. For autonomy, although the teacher facilitated the selection and integration of the podcast, the students still have control over where they will ask for the pace to be slowed down for them to understand better. Thus, giving them a sense of control causes them to be more motivated and engaged. For competence, the engaging nature and potentially scaffolded use of podcasts, such as comprehension checks to ensure students understand the questions and answers better, could have allowed students to experience successful comprehension and progress in their listening skills. The feeling of successfully understanding authentic content or improving their listening ability would satisfy their need for competence, thereby boosting their engagement. For relatedness, podcasts in general often expose learners to authentic language and real-world conversations, fostering a sense of connection to the target language community or relevant topics.

The overall findings and results implied that students benefit greatly from the method of listening to podcasts during listening activities. As mentioned a few times, this reflects the dual benefit of podcasts in enhancing ESL secondary students' listening skills and fostering a significantly positive affective response, specifically in terms of motivation and engagement.

As the results of this study showed a positive outcome, podcasts can be utilized as an engaging, versatile, and alternative tool when it comes to traditional listening methods. Teachers and educators can use this method as it motivates and engages students to listen during listening activities. This approach can transform potentially daunting or monotonous listening tasks into dynamic and stimulating learning experiences. This study also suggests that curriculum developers should do a re-evaluation of the current listening materials and pedagogical guidelines. Curriculum developers should consider formally incorporating authentic digital audio

resources, such as podcasts, into official ESL syllabi and textbooks, rather than merely suggesting them as supplementary materials.

## CONCLUSION

Overall, this study aimed to investigate the effects of using podcasts on ESL secondary school students' perceptions on their listening skills and their perceived levels of motivation and engagement in listening activities. Based on the findings, students made statistically significant progress in their listening skill and their motivation with engagement increased as well. Overall, this study presents that using podcasts is an impactful, and engaging tool in helping ESL students develop and improve their listening skills while increasing their motivation and engagement. It is not only focusing in improving listening skills but also students' competency in spoken communications. With a creative and well-structured listening activity that implements podcasts, this approach can foster a more motivating and engaging class while encouraging authentic spoken language use.

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