

## ENHANCING UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' LISTENING SKILLS THROUGH LEARNER AGENCY IN THE DIGITAL ERA

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### ABSTRACT

*Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi bagaimana mahasiswa meningkatkan keterampilan menyimak mereka melalui penerapan learner agency dalam konteks pembelajaran digital. Menggunakan pendekatan studi kasus kualitatif, data dikumpulkan melalui kuesioner terstruktur dan wawancara semi-terstruktur terhadap tiga mahasiswa yang secara aktif terlibat dalam aktivitas menyimak digital. Hasil analisis menunjukkan bahwa mahasiswa menunjukkan perilaku agentif seperti pengambilan keputusan yang sadar, pemilihan platform secara strategis, refleksi diri, serta adaptasi metode belajar sesuai konteks dan kebutuhan pribadi. Mereka tidak hanya memanfaatkan teknologi secara pasif, tetapi menggunakannya dengan tujuan yang jelas untuk mendukung pemahaman dan pengembangan keterampilan menyimak. Kesimpulan dari penelitian ini menegaskan bahwa learner agency memainkan peran penting dalam membentuk pengalaman belajar yang mandiri, reflektif, dan efektif. Implikasi dari temuan ini menunjukkan perlunya pengembangan pendekatan pembelajaran yang berpusat pada siswa dan mendukung otonomi dalam penggunaan teknologi, terutama untuk meningkatkan keterampilan menyimak dalam era digital.*

**Kata kunci:** Keterampilan Menyimak, Learner Agency, Pembelajaran Digital.

### ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore how university students enhance their listening skills through the application of learner agency in the context of digital learning. Using a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through structured questionnaires and semi-structured interviews with three students who were actively engaged in digital listening activities. The analysis revealed that students exhibited agentive behaviors such as conscious decision-making, strategic platform selection, self-reflection, and the adaptation of learning methods based on context and individual needs. They did not merely use technology passively but utilized it purposefully to support their understanding and development of listening skills. The findings of this study affirm that learner agency plays a significant role in shaping independent, reflective, and effective learning experiences. The implications suggest the need for the development of student-centered learning approaches that foster autonomy in the use of technology, particularly to improve listening skills in the digital age.

**Keywords:** Listening Skills, Learner Agency, Digital Learning

### INTRODUCTION

In the digital era, the way students learn languages has shifted dramatically. The integration of technology into educational environments has opened new avenues for accessing authentic materials and shaping learning experiences that are more flexible, personalized, and interactive. Among the four core language skills listening, speaking, reading, and writing listening holds a crucial yet often underestimated position. It is the most frequently used skill in daily communication and the foundation for successful language development (Canpolat et al., 2015). Listening

proficiency is vital not only for academic achievement but also for effective participation in real-world conversations and lifelong learning (Bozorgian, 2012; Djabbarova, 2021).

However, listening is also one of the most challenging skills to master. Its real-time nature requires learners to process information quickly, manage unfamiliar vocabulary and diverse accents, and retain meaning without the opportunity for immediate revision or clarification (Djabbarova, 2021; Waloyo, 2019). These difficulties are particularly pronounced for university students learning English as a foreign language (EFL), who

may lack sufficient classroom exposure to natural spoken input or struggle to find effective strategies for improvement. The challenges increase when listening input varies in dialect, speed, and formality elements that require learners to adopt flexible and adaptive strategies (Mairitsch et al., 2023; Thi & Chi, 2022).

The proliferation of digital tools has changed this landscape. Platforms such as YouTube, Spotify, TED Talks, Duolingo, and language-learning apps now offer learners on-demand access to rich and varied listening content. Students can select audio or video materials based on personal interests, control playback speed, view subtitles, repeat difficult segments, and engage in mobile, self-paced learning. These platforms support not only language acquisition but also learner independence and self-regulation (Dabamona & Yunus, 2022; Gunawan et al., 2023; Nguyen, 2023). For example, tools like spaced repetition apps and podcasts tailored to academic or entertainment topics allow students to combine enjoyment with targeted language development (Ivone & Renandya, 2019).

However, the presence of abundant technological tools does not automatically guarantee successful learning outcomes. As several scholars argue, effective learning in digital environments depends largely on students' ability to engage purposefully and strategically with available resources (Alberola-Mulet et al., 2021; Vani & Veeranjanyulu Naik, 2023). Without clear goals and reflective practices, the vast array of digital input can become overwhelming rather than empowering. Therefore, digital literacy must be accompanied by deliberate and mindful action a quality that is embodied in the concept of learner agency.

Recent research also emphasizes the importance of agency from both the teacher and student perspectives within Indonesia's evolving educational landscape. (Rachmawati Nur & Restu Luthfiani Maulida, 2024) highlight how English teachers exercise professional autonomy, intentionality, and contextualization when navigating curriculum reform under Kurikulum Merdeka a change that places greater demand on active pedagogical roles. At the learner level, (Shabir & Umam, 2020) reveal how students in the digital age often self-organize their learning due to misalignment between classroom practices and their expectations, reinforcing the necessity for

learning environments that support autonomous, digitally mediated engagement. These studies reaffirm the urgency of promoting learner agency in digital contexts, not only as a pedagogical strategy but also as a response to systemic and technological shifts in education.

Learner agency refers to the capacity of individuals to act intentionally, take initiative, make decisions, and reflect upon their learning paths (Larsen-Freeman D. et al., 2021; Teng, 2019). Unlike autonomy, which often focuses on independence from external control, agency emphasizes the learner's role as an active, self-directed participant within a learning context. In other words, agency is not simply doing things alone it is doing things with purpose, ownership, and adaptability. It includes the ability to choose materials, organize study time, self-monitor, and adjust strategies when faced with challenges (Holec, 1981), cited in (Benson, 2011).

In the context of listening, learner agency manifests when students decide what they listen to, how they structure their practice, what tools they rely on, and how they respond to difficulties. Some may re-listen to challenging segments multiple times, take notes, summarize orally, or create a schedule to maintain regular exposure. Others may combine learning strategies listening while reading transcripts, translating unfamiliar vocabulary, or recording themselves to improve pronunciation and comprehension (Matsumoto, 2021; Yusrini Islamiah Yunus et al., 2024). These agentic actions often reflect a high level of metacognitive awareness, as learners analyze their needs and evaluate their progress through tools such as journaling and playback review (Teng, 2019; Thi & Chi, 2022).

Numerous studies have confirmed the role of learner agency in facilitating effective language learning. Students who exhibit agency tend to be more engaged, resilient, and responsive to feedback (Thi & Chi, 2022). Mobile-assisted learning has also shown promise in developing vocabulary, confidence, and motivation, as students engage in self-initiated and context-based listening activities (Matsumoto, 2021; Siti Fatimah & Sulastri, 2021). Furthermore, research by (Al-Khasawneh et al., 2024) indicates that students' perception of agency along with access to appropriate strategies and tools significantly influences their success in improving listening skills.

Despite these advantages, several obstacles persist. Students frequently encounter difficulties in maintaining focus, navigating the overwhelming abundance of content, or selecting appropriate and effective materials (Alberola-Mulet et al., 2021). In the absence of guidance or structured strategies, digital resources may lead to confusion rather than empowerment. Therefore, learner agency must be supported by a deliberate process of goal-setting, strategic decision-making, and continuous reflection key elements that enable students to remain self-directed while progressing effectively (Dabamona & Yunus, 2022; Gao, 2010.)

This study aims to explore how university students enhance their listening skills through learner agency in the digital era. By focusing on students' experiences, preferences, and self-devised strategies, the research investigates how learners act intentionally within digital spaces to improve their comprehension. Instead of treating technology as the primary variable, the study shifts focus toward how learners use technology meaningfully making personal and strategic decisions that shape their listening development. The goal is to uncover the practical behaviors, mindsets, and tools that reflect agency in action and how they contribute to effective listening improvement in higher education contexts.

## **METHOD**

This study employed a qualitative case study approach to investigate the strategies university students use to enhance their listening skills, supported by elements of learner agency in digital learning contexts. The qualitative method allows for an in-depth exploration of students' personal approaches and experiences in managing their listening development, particularly in environments where digital tools offer diverse learning opportunities (Creswell, 2014).

The primary focus of this research is on how students take ownership of their listening activities how they choose, adapt, and sustain their strategies while engaging with digital resources. Learner agency is considered a supporting lens to understand how students make strategic decisions in developing their listening proficiency.

The participants consisted of three undergraduate students who were purposively selected based on their active engagement in digital listening activities. To ensure confidentiality and

privacy, pseudonyms have been used in reporting the findings. These participants provided detailed accounts of their listening practices, strategic choices, and reflective behaviors.

Data collection was conducted using two main instruments: a structured questionnaire and a semi-structured interview guide. The questionnaire gathered initial insights into students' behaviors and preferences related to listening strategy use, including their levels of initiative, reflection, and digital tool selection (Larsen-Freeman D. et al., 2021; Teng, 2019). The interviews followed to provide deeper, contextualized accounts of how students plan, execute, and adjust their strategies to meet personal listening goals in the digital environment.

Data were analyzed using (Miles et al., 2014) interactive model, which includes data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Responses were coded thematically to identify recurring strategies and the underlying agentic behaviors that support them, such as goal-setting, self-monitoring, and persistence in overcoming listening challenges.

By centering listening skills and using learner agency as a lens rather than the main focus, this study aims to highlight how students actively manage their listening development through purposeful strategies in the digital era

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

This section presents the findings of the study, focusing on how university students demonstrate learner agency in enhancing their listening skills within the digital era. The analysis integrates both quantitative data from questionnaires and qualitative insights from interviews to provide a comprehensive understanding of students' self-directed behaviors, strategic choices, reflective practices, and personalized adaptations in their listening development. By exploring these themes, the study highlights the active role learners play in shaping their own learning experiences through intentional and meaningful engagement with digital resources.

The discussion elaborates on how these behaviors and mindsets reflect core dimensions of learner agency and contribute to effective listening skill improvement in higher education contexts, offering practical implications for language educators and curriculum designers.

### **Taking Charge of Listening Practice**

The questionnaire data showed that all participants highly value independence in their listening skill development. They unanimously agreed that self-discipline and personal motivation are the driving forces behind their improvement. This autonomy allows them to take ownership of their learning journey without waiting for external prompts.

James noted that he intentionally schedules his listening sessions around his academic calendar, intensifying practice during less hectic periods and keeping lighter habits as exams approach. He stated that incorporating regular time blocks into his daily program helped him prevent procrastinating. Sophia, on the other hand, discussed how she incorporates listening into her daily life in a variety of ways, including during idle moments like commuting or exercise. She finds that this informal approach relieves stress and improves consistency. Isabella prioritized environmental control by avoiding distractions, frequently escaping to quiet nooks of the library or utilizing applications to prevent notifications during her practice. She also emphasized the need of mental preparation, such as setting specific goals for each session.

Together, these practices illustrate how learners deliberately structure their time and environment to maximize focus and effectiveness. The proactive mindset reflected here demonstrates that learner agency extends beyond choice of content to encompass how, when, and where listening practice occurs.

### **Intentional Engagement with Digital Platforms**

Data from the questionnaire indicated a diverse but intentional use of digital resources. Participants do not passively consume content; instead, they carefully select platforms and materials that fit their interests and learning objectives.

James chooses content pertaining to current events and his academic interests in economics, primarily via podcasts and specialist language apps. His choices are deliberate, with an emphasis on enhancing contextual awareness and vocabulary. Sophia favors the use of transcripts and captions as scaffolding aids in audiovisual content, such as TED Talks and instructional YouTube channels. She claimed that having control over playback speed and the ability to go back and review particular parts improves her understanding and memory. Isabella enjoys

diversity and regularly moves between sources and genres to keep things interesting. She clarified that she benefits from being exposed to a variety of dialects and speech rates through real-world sources including documentaries, interviews, and informal chats.

Participants also described active strategies while engaging with digital materials, such as pausing to repeat difficult segments, taking notes, and summarizing content in their own words. Sophia, for example, creates vocabulary lists from phrases she encounters, which she later reviews using spaced repetition apps. This level of interaction demonstrates that learners are not merely consuming but are actively processing and integrating content.

### **Reflective Practice and Self-Evaluation**

The questionnaire responses revealed that participants regularly engage in self-reflection as a fundamental part of their listening development. They recognize the importance of monitoring their progress and adjusting strategies to overcome challenges.

James regularly tracks his progress by comparing his listening comprehension results from online tests that were given months apart. In order to fill in these gaps, he carefully considers challenges like strange jargon or intricate phrase patterns and creates targeted activities. Sophia admitted that she faces challenges with various English dialects, which at first scared her but are now used as indicators of her development. After every listening session, she writes her thoughts down in her journal. Isabella uses playback and recording strategies, summarizing what she has heard out loud and assessing her comprehension and pronunciation.

These reflective practices reveal a metacognitive awareness that empowers learners to regulate their learning consciously. They set realistic goals, identify weaknesses, and adapt approaches behaviors that sustain motivation and improve effectiveness.

### **Flexible and Personalized Listening Strategies**

Participants indicated through the questionnaire that they continuously tailor their listening methods to fit their mood, goals, and context, showcasing high adaptability.

James uses a cyclical strategy that alternates between extensive listening, which aims

to increase general fluency and enjoyment, and focused listening, where he pays particular attention to detail and vocabulary acquisition. Additionally, he tries with various formats, including talks, news stories, and lectures. Sophia adjusts the replay speed based on how well-versed she is in the subject; she speeds up for review or informal listening and slows down for unfamiliar or challenging subjects. She emphasized that this control keeps people engaged and lessens irritation. By combining audio with transcripts, subtitles, or relevant reading materials, Isabella incorporates multimodal techniques. She discovers that this combination improves understanding and memory, particularly when dealing with difficult subjects.

Furthermore, participants discussed their balance between structured lessons and informal listening experiences. Sophia values the predictability of language courses but finds authentic podcasts and interviews crucial for real-world exposure. Isabella shared that varying difficulty levels and content types keeps her motivated and prevents burnout, emphasizing the importance of enjoyment alongside rigor.

This flexibility underscores learners' capacity to self-manage and innovate, critical in a digital landscape offering boundless resources but requiring strategic navigation.

### **Summary of Findings**

This study revealed that university students enhance their listening skills in the digital era through a strong sense of learner agency, reflected in their intentional behaviors, personalized strategies, and reflective learning processes. Participants demonstrated a proactive approach by taking charge of their practice, independently managing their time and environment to support consistent listening activities. They used digital tools not passively, but with clear intention carefully selecting content, platforms, and methods that aligned with their personal goals and interests.

Learners also showed high levels of adaptability, tailoring their listening strategies to suit varying contexts, moods, and material complexity. Techniques such as adjusting playback speed, using subtitles, and combining audio with written transcripts allowed them to engage more deeply with content. Moreover, reflective practices such as journaling, self-assessment, and progress tracking helped them to identify areas for improvement and adapt their methods accordingly.

The data clearly indicates that learner agency plays a central role in the development of listening skills, not just by enabling students to access digital resources, but by empowering them to use those resources strategically and meaningfully. Their actions are guided by purpose, reflection, and self-direction essential components for successful listening development in the digital age.

### **DISCUSSION**

This study investigated how university students enhance their listening skills through the exercise of learner agency in a digitally rich environment. Four interconnected themes emerged taking charge of listening practice, intentional engagement with digital platforms, reflective learning, and flexible, personalized strategies. These findings reflect the multidimensional nature of learner agency and its critical role in promoting effective and autonomous listening skill development.

#### **Taking Charge of Listening Practice**

Participants demonstrated that self-discipline, personal initiative, and self-motivation are central to their learning success. These behaviors are consistent with (Canpolat et al., 2015), who define listening as an active skill that requires both cognitive and emotional engagement. James's routine scheduling and Sophia's use of spare moments for listening show how students manage their time and context to optimize learning opportunities.

Moreover, Isabella's environmental control strategy, such as finding quiet spaces or using apps to reduce distraction, highlights how learners structure their surroundings to support focus an indicator of learner ownership (Larsen-Freeman D. et al., 2021). These findings resonate with (Holec 1981) cited in (Benson 2011), who argue that learners exercising agency manage and take responsibility for all aspects of the learning process.

#### **Intentional Engagement with Digital Platforms**

Unlike passive users, students in this study actively selected content based on their academic interests, preferred formats, and language goals. For example, James gravitated toward economics podcasts, while Sophia relied on subtitles and transcripts to scaffold comprehension. This reflects the findings of (Ivone & Renandya, 2019), who



highlight that digital platforms support autonomous learning when learners use them selectively and intentionally.

Sophia's practice of extracting vocabulary and reviewing it with spaced repetition apps also aligns with (Dabamona & Yunus, 2022), who state that integrating digital tools with reflection and goal-setting boosts listening comprehension and learner confidence. These actions are strategic and goal-directed, illustrating how digital literacy, when coupled with agency, transforms content into meaningful learning experiences.

### **Reflective Practice and Self-Evaluation**

Participants showed metacognitive awareness through practices such as journaling, progress comparison, and playback review. Reflection is a crucial component of learner agency and autonomy in listening, allowing learners to regulate their progress and adapt strategies. According to (Teng, 2019), such reflection fosters motivation, resilience, and continuous improvement traits demonstrated by all three participants.

Sophia's habit of journaling about her comprehension struggles and successes particularly echoes (Thi & Chi, 2022), who emphasize that reflection enables learners to better navigate the challenges of understanding unfamiliar accents or fast speech. Likewise, Isabella's use of self-recordings and oral summaries reveals how learners use internal feedback loops to assess and reinforce understanding.

### **Flexible and Personalized Listening Strategies**

The adaptability of participants' strategies switching between formal and informal sources, using varied speeds, or pairing audio with text demonstrates an advanced level of learner agency. As (Mairitsch et al., 2023) explain, successful autonomous learners personalize their learning according to task complexity, emotional state, and contextual demands. These behaviors are not fixed but evolve based on learners' immediate needs and long-term goals.

This mirrors findings by (Alberola-Mulet et al., 2021), who cautioned that while digital content offers convenience, students must engage critically and actively to avoid shallow learning. The participants' ability to manage diverse sources, identify effective combinations (such as pairing TED Talks with transcripts), and adjust methods

based on feedback showcases high levels of strategic competence and control.

Furthermore, participants balanced structured lessons with real-world input, recognizing that both contribute uniquely to their development. Sophia valued curriculum-based courses for grammar and structure but turned to podcasts for authentic, spontaneous speech aligning with (Vani & Veeranjanyulu Naik, 2023), who argue that strong listening skills emerge from exposure to diverse, authentic input combined with strategic practice.

### **Broader Implications: Listening as an Agentive Skill**

Listening is not merely about hearing but involves active processing, decision-making, and self-regulation. As emphasized by (Djabbarova, 2021), effective listening is crucial for communication, problem-solving, and academic success. This study reveals that learner agency enables students to transform listening into a purposeful, strategic skill. Through ownership, reflection, and experimentation, students go beyond passive reception toward active engagement with auditory input.

The participants also embodied the key dimensions of listening autonomy outlined by (Al-Khasawneh et al., 2024): they showed self-efficacy, handled learning difficulties through personal strategies, and leveraged digital tools to take control of their learning progress. This aligns with research by (Gao, 2010), who stressed that autonomous learners define their learning paths and adapt based on context and motivation.

### **Discussion**

The findings of this study emphasize that learner agency is a critical factor in developing listening skills in the digital era. Through self-initiated scheduling, selective engagement with digital materials, reflective self-assessment, and adaptive strategies, learners exhibited autonomy, motivation, and resilience. These behaviors not only reflect theoretical frameworks of agency and autonomy but also provide practical guidance for educators and curriculum developers.

To truly support listening development in digital environments, educators must promote learner-centered approaches that empower students to make informed, personalized decisions. Incorporating features like digital portfolios, self-

reflection tools, and flexible listening tasks can nurture students' agency and enhance their long-term listening proficiency.

## CONCLUSION

This study confirms that the development of students' listening skills in the digital era is strongly influenced by learner agency the ability of students to consciously, reflectively, and strategically manage their own learning processes. Through deliberate decision-making, selective use of technology, and ongoing self-reflection, students demonstrate that they are not merely passive users of online materials, but active participants shaping their own learning experiences. These findings address the concerns raised in the introduction regarding the challenges of mastering listening skills and the need for effective strategies amid the abundance of digital resources. Students were able to adapt their listening strategies according to context, purpose, and personal preferences, such as selecting relevant digital platforms, adjusting playback speeds, combining audio with text, and engaging in reflective practices like note-taking, self-assessment, and re-recording.

The implication of these findings is the importance of promoting student-centered learning that encourages initiative and reflection in the use of technology. In the future, listening instruction programs should be designed to reinforce learner agency by providing flexible environments where students can set goals, choose materials, and evaluate or modify their approaches independently. This kind of approach can not only enhance the effectiveness of listening skill development but also equip students with lifelong learning competencies necessary for success in an ever-evolving digital world.

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