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Exploring Lived Experiences in Academic Listening through TED Talks: An Ethnography Study

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abstrak – Penelitian ini bertujuan mengeksplorasi pengalaman mahasiswa EFL dalam mempelajari *academic listening* melalui pemanfaatan TED Talks di kelas Academic Listening pada sebuah perguruan tinggi swasta di Bojonegoro. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain *educational ethnography*. Data diperoleh melalui observasi kelas, wawancara semi-terstruktur, jurnal reflektif, dan dokumentasi tugas *mind mapping*. Partisipan terdiri dari tujuh mahasiswa yang dipilih dengan teknik *purposive sampling*. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa TED Talks mendorong terbentuknya budaya belajar aktif melalui kebiasaan mencatat, diskusi kelompok, dan refleksi diri. Mahasiswa menghadapi tantangan linguistik berupa kecepatan berbicara penutur asli, kosakata akademik yang kompleks, serta variasi aksen. Untuk mengatasi kesulitan tersebut, mereka mengembangkan strategi kompensasi seperti memutar ulang video, menggunakan fitur *slow motion*, mencatat kosakata baru, dan memanfaatkan subtitle bahasa Inggris. Selain itu, keterkaitan topik TED Talks dengan kehidupan mahasiswa menumbuhkan respons afektif positif berupa motivasi, minat, dan peningkatan kepercayaan diri dalam keterampilan listening. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa TED Talks tidak hanya berfungsi sebagai media autentik dalam pembelajaran listening, tetapi juga membentuk ekosistem belajar yang sosial dan reflektif dalam konteks EFL di perguruan tinggi.

Kata kunci – Mendengarkan dalam Konteks Akademik, TED Talks, pengalaman pribadi, etnografi, siswa EFL

Abstract – This study explores the experiences of EFL students in learning academic listening through the integration of TED Talks in an Academic Listening class at a private university in Bojonegoro. Using a qualitative approach with an educational ethnography design, data were collected through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, reflective journals, and mind mapping assignments. The participants consisted of seven students selected through purposive sampling. The findings reveal that TED Talks foster an active learning culture by encouraging note-taking, group discussions, and self-reflection. Students encountered linguistic challenges such as the fast pace of native speakers, complex academic vocabulary, and diverse accents. To address these difficulties, they employed compensatory strategies including replaying videos, using the slow-motion feature, recording new vocabulary, and utilizing English subtitles. Moreover, the relevance of TED Talk topics to students' lives generated positive

affective responses, such as motivation, interest, and increased confidence in listening skills. In conclusion, TED Talks function not only as authentic media for listening instruction but also as a catalyst for building a social and reflective learning ecosystem within the EFL context at the university level.

Keywords – Academic Listening, TED Talks, lived experiences, ethnography, EFL students

INTRODUCTION

Listening competence is widely regarded as one of the most challenging yet critical language skills in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning. In higher education settings, the demand for students to comprehend academic discourse in English has grown considerably, driven by the widespread use of English-medium resources such as journals, conference presentations, and audiovisual content. Among the authentic media gaining significant traction in Academic Listening instruction is TED Talks a public presentation platform featuring diverse scientific, social, and motivational topics delivered by experts from around the world.

The use of TED Talks as listening instructional material is considered pedagogically relevant because it presents English in authentic contexts, including natural accent variations, native-speaker speech rates, academic vocabulary, and paralinguistic features such as speaker gestures and facial expressions. This aligns with Field's (2008) argument that authentic materials, while imposing a higher cognitive load than pedagogically modified inputs, offer far richer and more meaningful learning experiences. However, in-depth ethnographic research exploring Indonesian EFL students' actual lived experiences while engaging with TED Talks in the classroom remains scarce. Previous studies have confirmed the effectiveness of TED Talks in improving listening comprehension and expanding academic vocabulary in an EFL context (Gavenila et al., 2021; Thuy & Tuyen, 2024), yet the difficulties students face regarding speaking speed and dense vocabulary remain an ongoing challenge (Astika & Kurniawan, 2020).

This study addresses that gap by comprehensively investigating how English Education students at a private university in Bojonegoro, East Java, experience, interpret, and respond to TED Talks use in their Academic Listening course. Drawing on an educational ethnography approach (Brewer, 2000), the study aims to produce a

thick description (Geertz, 1988) of classroom cultural dynamics, the challenges students encounter, the adaptive strategies they develop, and the affective and sociomaterial factors shaping their learning experiences.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed an educational ethnography approach with a qualitative design. Data collection was conducted over approximately one and a half months in an Academic Listening class at the English Education Study Program of a private university in Bojonegoro Regency, East Java, where English is taught as a Foreign Language (EFL).

Data collection involved methodological triangulation comprising four instruments, one classroom observation session conducted in the campus computer laboratory, semi-structured in-depth interviews with seven student participants, conducted approximately three weeks after the observation session, reflective journal entries collected once at the end of the data collection period, and analysis of mind mapping assignment artifacts. The seven participants were selected through purposive sampling, and their real identities were disguised using consistent codes Student 1 (S1) through Student 7 (S7) to maintain data confidentiality and uphold research ethics.

Data analysis followed the open coding procedure proposed by (Miles et al., 2014) in which meaning units were identified from interview transcripts, field notes, and journal entries, then grouped into categories and subsequently developed into major themes. To ensure the credibility of the findings, methodological triangulation was applied by cross-checking data across all collection instruments. Additionally, member checking was conducted by returning data interpretations to the seven participants to verify alignment between their experiences and the researcher's analytical conclusions.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Based on a comprehensive ethnographic data analysis of documents, transcripts, and field notes, the dynamics of students' experiences in using TED Talks videos as learning media were categorized into the following five major themes.

1. Student Engagement and Classroom Learning Culture

The Academic Listening learning process using TED Talks videos was routinely initiated by an introduction from the lecturer, followed by the distribution of the video link through the class WhatsApp group for independent analysis by students using computers in the campus computer laboratory. From this routine activity, a unique form of student engagement and classroom habit developed. The most dominant classroom learning culture pattern was the emergence of a note-taking habit. During TED Talks video sessions, a number of students spontaneously recorded content and important points they understood in their notebooks or digital documents.

Beyond the note-taking culture, this class was also characterized by strong collaborative discussion. After the independent listening process concluded, the lecturer asked students to form small groups to consolidate their ideas and collaboratively discuss the video content before presenting their discussion in the form of mind mapping artifacts. This active engagement was reflected in an interview with S4:

"Biasanya kalo analisis video itu santai, enjoy dan semuanya focus, tapi tergantung video TED Talks nya kayak kecepatan dan kosakata nya susah atau engga. Rata-rata semuanya aktif dan banyak memberikan pendapat karena sama dosen diminta untuk memberikan pendapatnya setelah menyimak video TED Talks."

[Usually, when analyzing videos, it is relaxed, enjoyable, and everyone focuses, but it depends on the TED Talks video itself, like whether the speed and vocabulary are difficult or not. On average, everyone is active and voices many opinions because the lecturer asks us to express our thoughts after listening to the TED Talks video]

Through this classroom habit, listening activities that were initially individual in nature transformed into an interactive sociocultural experience, in which students collectively constructed their academic understanding through supportive group discussion spaces. This collaborative pattern is also consistent with the findings of (Rozak, 2014), who documented that the use of video-based extensive listening in an Indonesian EFL context at IKIP PGRI Bojonegoro successfully fostered students' active participation, motivation, and collaborative engagement during listening activities, and with (Tirtanawati, 2016), whose classroom action research at the same institution found that when students were given structured opportunities to actively participate and take turns presenting ideas to their peers, the classroom atmosphere became more alive, enjoyable, and conducive reflecting a student-centered learning culture that parallels the collaborative dynamics observed in this study. This pattern is consistent with (Vygotsky, 1978) sociocultural theory, which positions peer interaction as a fundamental scaffold for cognitive and linguistic development.

2. Linguistic and Non-Linguistic Challenges

As a learning medium grounded in authentic materials, TED Talks presented a genuinely challenging language ecosystem for the students. The challenges experienced were multidimensional, encompassing internal linguistic barriers such as unfamiliar vocabulary, and external barriers such as speech rate and accent variation. The most dominant challenge reported by the majority of participants was the speaking speed of TED Talks presenters. This was compounded by the presence of new academic vocabulary and technical terms unfamiliar to the students, as well as intonation and accent variations, particularly British English accents that frequently triggered difficulties in maintaining concentration.

These challenges were consistently documented across both reflective journal entries and in-depth interview transcripts. S1 acknowledged:

"Kalo saya sendiri itu kendalanya di kecepatan berbicara, suasana kelas biasanya santai. Tapi kalo video TED Talks nya menggunakan aksen British kadang aku ngga focus dan kadang juga bingung."

[For me personally, the obstacle is the speech rate. But if the TED Talks video uses a British accent, sometimes I lose focus and sometimes I also get confused.]

These authentic linguistic barriers indicate that the use of authentic materials demands an intensive listening adaptation process from students, as confirmed by (Field, 2008), who posits that authentic materials generate a substantially higher cognitive load than modified inputs. This is further supported by (Rozak et al., 2021), whose study of Indonesian student teachers of English at an initial teacher education institution in East Java found that speech rate and unfamiliar vocabulary in authentic listening materials remained the most challenging aspects even when audio was delivered at a slow speed of 120 words per minute a finding that mirrors the difficulties articulated by participants in this study.

3. Compensatory Strategies and Media Usage Patterns

In response to the various linguistic difficulties encountered in TED Talks materials, students independently developed several compensatory strategies (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990). The most commonly applied strategies were replaying the video, using playback speed adjustment or slow-motion features, and noting down unfamiliar vocabulary to search for meanings later. A further interesting finding concerned shifts in subtitle usage patterns. Field observations revealed that most students were initially dependent on Indonesian subtitles. However, the lecturer's in-class instructional rule discouraging Indonesian subtitle use prompted students to adapt some switching to English subtitles to verify spelling, while others opted to turn off subtitles entirely.

S5 demonstrated a more multimodal approach by attending to the speaker's non-verbal cues:

"Saya menggunakan strategi 'mencatat'. Saya mencoba mencatat kata kunci dan kosakata penting. Saya juga memperhatikan gerak-gerik pembicara serta alat bantu visual di layar untuk membantu saya memahami konteks pembicaraan tersebut.

Mengamati ekspresi pembicara membantu saya memahami pesannya dengan lebih baik daripada hanya mendengarkan suaranya saja."

[I use a 'note-taking' strategy. I try to write down key words and important vocabulary. I also pay attention to the speaker's gestures and visual aids on the screen to help me understand the context of the talk. Observing the speaker's expressions helps me understand the message better than just listening to their voice alone.]

This multimodal strategy aligns with (Goh, 2008) metacognitive framework for listening instruction, which emphasizes that learners who actively monitor and evaluate their own comprehension processes achieve significantly better outcomes. In the same vein, (Rozak, 2014) documented that pre-service English language teachers independently applied similar strategies including repeated video playback, pre-listening background activation, and vocabulary noting during the while-listening stage as part of a metacognitive sequence that guided them through the listening process.

4. Students' Affective Responses and Self-Reflection

The ethnographic dimension of classroom culture was not only shaped by cognitive activities but was also strongly influenced by students' affective responses throughout the learning process. Analysis of students' reflective journal entries revealed that the use of the video *Inside the Mind of a Master Procrastinator* by Tim Urban (TED Conference, 2016) created dynamic emotional fluctuations ranging from nervousness and anxiety at the outset to feelings of enjoyment, interest, engagement, and heightened self-confidence by the end of the session.

The primary factor driving these positive affective responses was the high relevance of the topic to students' everyday lives. S1 wrote in the reflective journal:

"Saya merasa senang dan tertarik saat mendengarkan TED Talk hari ini karena topiknya sangat menginspirasi dan berkaitan dengan kehidupan sehari-hari. Hal itu

juga membuat saya semakin termotivasi untuk meningkatkan kemampuan mendengarkan saya."

"I feel happy and interested when listening to the TED Talk today because the topic is very inspiring and relates to daily life. It also makes me more motivated to improve my listening skills."

These findings are explicable through (Krashen, 1982) when topics are personally relevant and motivating, the affective filter lowers, enabling input to be processed more deeply. This affective dynamic is echoed in (Rozak, 2014) study, which found that when students were given the freedom to select video topics aligned with their personal interests, their motivation to listen increased significantly and their overall classroom engagement improved suggesting that topic relevance is a powerful affective variable in EFL listening pedagogy. This is further supported by (Dörnyei, 2001) motivational framework, which highlights task relevance and personal identification with content as key drivers of sustained learning motivation evidenced here by students' spontaneous inclusion of personal moral reflections in their mind mapping artifacts.

5. Social Interaction, Instructional Roles of the Lecturer, and Laboratory Facilities

The pattern of social interaction in this class was divided into student-student collaboration (horizontal interaction) and student-lecturer interaction (vertical interaction). In horizontal interaction, students developed a culture of collaboration and mutual support, spontaneously discussing with classmates when encountering difficulties in understanding the TED Talks content. Meanwhile, the instructional role of the lecturer occupied a central position in the classroom providing guidance, time limitations, constructive feedback, and actively circulating to personally monitor students' difficulties, as S2 explained:

"Lebih dominan dosen, karena dosen waktu mengisi kelas itu berkeliling dan menanyakan ke mahasiswa apa yang sulit, misal dalam hal arti kata dosen akan menjelaskan dengan detail dibanding saat tanya ke teman."

[The lecturer is more dominant because when handling the class, the lecturer walks around and asks students what is difficult; for instance, regarding word meanings, the lecturer will explain in detail compared to when asking a friend.]

On the physical dimension, laboratory infrastructure also created its own challenges. When the main computer server experienced network disruption, students were required to play and analyze TED Talks videos independently on their individual computers. Interestingly, this limitation produced an unintended positive outcome a productive constraint. The absence of centralized video playback afforded students full control over playback speed and subtitles according to their individual learning pace. Furthermore, equipment limitations encouraged students to creatively utilize personal smartphones through a spontaneous Bring Your Own Device (BYOD) practice, as S6 reflected:

"Saya pernah dapat headphone yang audionya kecil suaranya jadi kalo seperti itu biasanya saya minta link tautan video TED Talks dan lebih memilih mendengarkan lewat smartphone pribadi saya."

"I once got headphones with low audio volume, so when that happens, I usually ask for the TED Talks video link and prefer to listen through my personal smartphone."

This phenomenon is theoretically aligned with the concept of affordance (Gibson, 1979) which hold that material artifacts and human agency are mutually constitutive in the production of social practices. This spontaneous technological adaptation also resonates with (Rozak et al., 2021) observation that when student teachers at an Indonesian initial teacher education institution were given autonomy over their listening material selection and playback control, they demonstrated greater agency and self-regulation in their learning process suggesting that learner agency emerges most powerfully when institutional constraints, whether policy-based or infrastructure-based, create space for independent decision-making.

In a parallel vein, (Tirtanawati, 2016) observed that students at IKIP PGRI Bojonegoro who initially struggled with confidence and active participation gradually demonstrated greater self-directedness and problem-solving ability when the learning environment was restructured to give them more agency a process structurally analogous to how the infrastructure limitations in the present study involuntarily but productively repositioned students as independent agents of their own learning. From this perspective, laboratory infrastructure failure did not merely constrain learning; it actively reconfigured the conditions under which learning took place, triggering the emergence of learner agency (van Lier, 2004) and creative technological adaptation. The computer laboratory, therefore, functioned not as a rigid physical backdrop but as a dynamic sociomaterial environment in which physical constraints stimulated independent learning and collaborative creativity.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that EFL students' lived experiences in Academic Listening through TED Talks are shaped by an intricate interplay of cognitive, affective, social, and institutional-material forces. Specifically, three key conclusions emerge: (1) TED Talks use created a rich sociocultural learning ecosystem, marked by the development of a note-taking culture and strong small-group discussions in constructing mind mapping artifacts; (2) although students faced linguistic barriers in the form of native speakers' speech rate and complex unfamiliar vocabulary, they actively responded through diverse independent compensatory strategies and demonstrated positive affective development driven by the high relevance of the topic to their real lives; and (3) sociomaterial obstacles arising from limited computer laboratory infrastructure did not halt the academic process; instead, these constraints triggered the emergence of learner agency and creative technological adaptation through spontaneous BYOD practices.

The pedagogical implications of these findings are fourfold. First, the effectiveness of TED Talks as authentic listening material is maximized when paired with structured pre-listening activities and post-listening reflection tasks. Second, explicit metacognitive strategy instruction teaching students how to use playback

speed control, pause and translate sequences, and selective subtitle use can formalize the informal strategies students independently developed. Third, course designers should prioritize thematically resonant TED Talks topics that align with students' interests and lived realities. Fourth, the autonomy-building effects of infrastructure limitations point to the value of designing flexible learning environments that preserve students' agency over media interaction regardless of technical constraints.

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