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ENACTING AGENCY IN INFORMAL LEARNING: AN ECOLOGICAL STUDY OF EFL LEARNERS' PODCAST USE FOR VOCABULARY DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract: Podcasts have emerged as an accessible, flexible, and learner-centered resource in informal English vocabulary development. While learner autonomy and digital vocabulary learning have been studied, limited research has investigated how EFL learners exercise agency when using podcasts in informal settings, particularly through a theoretically grounded lens. This study explores how EFL learners enact agency in vocabulary learning through podcasts, using Priestley et al.'s (2015) ecological model of agency, which incorporates iterational, practical-evaluative, and projective dimensions. Adopting a qualitative phenomenological design, the study involved eight EFL learners who regularly used podcasts for vocabulary learning. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews and reflective journals and analyzed thematically. The findings show that learners' agentic engagement is shaped by past learning experiences, present decision-making strategies, and future language goals. Participants demonstrated autonomy in selecting content, integrating podcasts into their routines, and using supplementary digital tools. Their engagement was guided by previous experiences with formal learning, personal beliefs about language acquisition, and aspirations for academic or professional success. The study concludes that learner agency is a dynamic, contextually situated, and future-oriented process, and that podcasts offer a meaningful platform for enacting such agency in vocabulary development beyond the classroom.
Keywords: *Agency; autonomous learning; digital literacy; informal learning; podcast-based vocabulary learning.*

INTRODUCTION

EFL learners today engage with a wide range of digital tools beyond the boundaries of the traditional classroom. Among these, podcasts have gained popularity as a flexible, authentic, and learner-friendly resource for developing language skills, particularly vocabulary (Wang & Reynolds, 2024). These audio-based materials expose learners to rich, contextualized language input, often embedded in meaningful and engaging content (Rehman et al., 2024; Yu & Wen, 2024). Their accessibility via mobile devices and platforms also allows learners to incorporate English learning into their everyday routines, making podcasts a key resource in informal learning settings.

This shift toward digital and self-directed learning environments has brought renewed attention to the concept of learner agency—the ability of individuals to make purposeful, reflective choices about their learning (Jun & Mu, 2024). In vocabulary development, agency is evident when learners select relevant content, decide how to engage with it, and employ strategies that align with their personal goals and contexts (Zhang et al., 2023). Understanding how agency operates in informal learning environments is essential, especially as digital tools like podcasts continue to shape how language is acquired outside the classroom.

Although learner autonomy and vocabulary acquisition have received attention in language learning research (Abd Rahman et al., 2022; Le et al., 2023; Schiller et al., 2023), fewer studies have

investigated how learners exercise agency specifically when using podcasts for vocabulary learning in informal contexts. There remains a need to understand not just whether learners benefit from such tools, but how they actively make decisions, draw from past experiences, and orient their learning toward future goals within these digital spaces.

Despite the growing body of research on learner autonomy and digital tools, fewer studies have investigated podcast listening—as distinct from podcast creation—as a site for vocabulary development shaped by learner agency. While several studies address podcast production (e.g., Chaves-Yuste & de-la Peña, 2023; Chen, 2024), less attention has been given to how learners actively consume and engage with podcasts for vocabulary purposes in informal, everyday contexts. This distinction is crucial, as listening practices involve different forms of agency compared to content creation, particularly in terms of material selection, strategic processing, and routine integration.

This study addresses this gap by adopting Priestley et al.'s (2015) ecological model of agency, which conceptualizes agency as emerging through the interaction of three dimensions: the iterational (learners' past experiences and beliefs), the practical-evaluative (current contexts, resources, and constraints), and the projective (future goals and aspirations). Unlike frameworks that treat agency as an individual trait or capacity—such as Bandura's (1989) social cognitive theory, which emphasizes self-efficacy and personal belief systems—Priestley's model positions agency as relationally and ecologically constructed. This perspective is particularly suited to examining informal learning environments, where agency emerges through ongoing interaction with digital tools, personal histories, and future-oriented intentions rather than through predetermined instructional structures. This framework provides a comprehensive lens for examining how EFL learners navigate podcast-based vocabulary learning in real-life, informal environments.

The study aims to explore two key research questions: (1) How do EFL learners enact agency while using podcasts for vocabulary development in informal learning contexts? (2) How do learners' past experiences and future language goals inform the design of pedagogical support for informal learning?

By investigating these questions, this research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of learner agency within technology-mediated language learning, particularly in relation to how individuals actively construct, adapt, and sustain their vocabulary development strategies through informal digital tools. The findings are expected to illuminate the contextual and temporal dimensions of learner agency, offering valuable insights for language educators, curriculum designers, and learning platform developers seeking to support autonomous vocabulary learning. Furthermore, the study has the potential to inform future pedagogical practices and resource design by emphasizing the role of learner choice, goal orientation, and personal experience in shaping effective and meaningful vocabulary acquisition beyond the classroom.

The concept of agency as proposed by Priestley et al. (2015) offers a complex and dynamic understanding of human action, particularly within educational contexts. Rather than viewing agency as a fixed trait or an individual's inherent capacity to act independently, Priestley and colleagues conceptualize agency as a temporally embedded and context-dependent process (Priestley & Drew, 2019). This means that agency is not something people simply possess or lack, but something that is enacted through time, shaped by past experiences, present conditions, and future aspirations.

At the heart of their framework is a three-dimensional model of agency, which includes the iterational, practical-evaluative, and projective dimensions (Priestley et al., 2015). The iterational dimension refers to how individuals draw upon their past experiences, habits, and routines in shaping their actions. These past influences provide a sense of continuity and stability, shaping how individuals perceive their current possibilities. The practical-evaluative dimension involves making judgments and decisions in the present, based on the current context and available resources. It is about how individuals respond to immediate situations, constraints, and affordances. Finally, the projective dimension encompasses the forward-looking aspect of agency, where individuals imagine and work toward future goals, desires, and possibilities.

Priestley et al. (2015) also emphasize an ecological view of agency, which highlights that agency does not reside solely within the individual but emerges through interaction with the surrounding environment. This includes social structures, cultural norms, institutional policies, and material resources. From this perspective, agency is not simply about choosing freely but is

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always conditioned by external factors that enable or constrain action (De Roeck & Van Poeck, 2023). For example, a teacher's agency in the classroom is shaped not only by their professional knowledge but also by curriculum demands, school leadership, and available teaching tools.

Moreover, agency is viewed as relational and situated, meaning it depends on the specific context and is deeply influenced by interactions with others. It is not exercised in isolation but in response to and in dialogue with the social world (Priestley et al., 2023). This relational perspective allows for a more realistic understanding of how people navigate complex environments, such as schools or digital learning spaces, where power relations, institutional structures, and cultural expectations all play a role.

In summary, Priestley et al.'s (2015) conceptualization of agency moves beyond simplistic notions of personal empowerment to offer a more grounded, process-oriented view. It highlights how individuals' actions are shaped by their histories, present circumstances, and imagined futures, within a broader ecological context. This model is particularly useful in educational research, as it allows for a nuanced exploration of how teachers and learners engage with and respond to the multiple influences that shape their everyday experiences.

Research on learner agency, digital tools, and vocabulary development in EFL contexts has expanded in recent years, reflecting a growing interest in how learners engage with language learning beyond the classroom. Several studies have explored learner agency in both formal and informal environments, while others have examined the role of digital resources—particularly podcasts—in supporting language acquisition. However, limited research has addressed the intersection of these areas: how EFL learners enact agency when using podcasts for vocabulary learning in informal contexts.

Chodkiewicz (2023) provides valuable insight into how advanced EFL learners demonstrate agency across formal and informal learning practices. The study reveals that learners consciously adopt strategic behaviors, such as reflection and goal-setting, to enhance their English proficiency. Similarly, He et al. (2024) examine learner agency in peer review activities and emphasize the interplay between personal factors—such as learner beliefs and prior experiences—and contextual variables like instructional practices and time constraints. Although this study is situated in formal classroom settings, it reinforces the view of agency as a multidimensional construct that emerges through social and contextual engagement.

The role of digital tools in fostering learner agency has also been explored through various media. Huang (2023) and Huang and Lammers (2023) demonstrate how informal video-based learning can enhance vocabulary acquisition and promote active learner involvement. Learners in these studies were not passive recipients of content but actively chose materials aligned with their interests and cultural contexts. These findings highlight the potential of informal media to facilitate self-directed, agentic learning experiences.

Podcasts, in particular, have received increasing attention for their value in language education. Chaves-Yuste and de-la Peña (2023) show that podcast creation can enhance linguistic competence—especially in speaking and listening—and that generative AI integration can enrich students' engagement. Chen (2024) further supports this by documenting Taiwanese EFL learners' enjoyment and personal growth through podcast production, noting that the activity connected deeply with learners' interests and lifestyles. These studies, while focused primarily on podcast creation rather than consumption, underscore the motivational and contextual affordances that podcasts offer.

Other studies have examined the role of podcasts more directly in vocabulary development. Liu (2023) emphasizes the richness of academic vocabulary found in podcasts, identifying them as valuable resources for English for Academic Purposes (EAP) learners. Similarly, Rezai et al. (2024) establish a positive correlation between informal digital learning of English (IDLE), including podcast use, and vocabulary knowledge among EFL learners. Nurmukhamedov and Sharakhimov (2024) also point to the potential for incidental vocabulary learning through podcast listening, particularly for mid- and low-frequency words. Collectively, these studies affirm that podcasts are a viable and effective medium for vocabulary exposure in informal settings.

Despite these contributions, gaps remain in the current literature. Few studies have focused on podcast listening as a site for vocabulary learning that is actively shaped by learners' agency. Much of the existing work addresses outcomes (e.g., vocabulary gains or language competence) without deeply examining the decision-making processes

and contextual factors that underlie learners' engagement with podcasts. Furthermore, although some research applies the concept of agency to digital or informal learning (e.g., Huang & Lammers, 2023), very few studies adopt a theoretically grounded framework such as Priestley et al.'s (2015) ecological model of agency to systematically analyze learners' behaviors.

The present study responds to this gap by examining how EFL learners enact agency in their use of podcasts for vocabulary development in informal contexts. By situating this investigation within the ecological model of agency, the study offers a comprehensive view of how learners' past experiences, present conditions, and future aspirations interact to shape their podcast-based learning practices. This approach builds on prior findings while addressing an underexplored intersection of learner agency, podcast use, and vocabulary learning beyond the classroom.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative phenomenological design to explore how EFL learners experience and enact agency while using podcasts for vocabulary development in informal contexts. Phenomenology is appropriate for investigating learners' lived experiences and the meanings they ascribe to their actions, particularly in self-directed, technology-mediated environments (Smith, 2017). Aligned with Priestley et al.'s (2015) ecological model of agency—which emphasizes the interplay of past experiences, present contexts, and future goals—this design allows for an in-depth understanding of how learners perceive and navigate their vocabulary learning through podcasts beyond the classroom.

The participants in this study were eight EFL learners enrolled in undergraduate programs at a university in Indonesia, selected through purposive sampling. Selection criteria included: (1) regular engagement with English-language podcasts specifically for vocabulary learning, (2) intermediate to advanced English proficiency (equivalent to CEFR B1-C1), and (3) willingness to reflect on and articulate their informal learning experiences.

Participant demographics are presented in Table 4 below. The sample varied in terms of age (ranging from 19 to 23 years old), years of English study (8 to 12 years), major field of study, podcast usage patterns (from 3 to 10 hours per week), and personal learning goals (e.g., exam preparation, professional communication, personal interest). This diversity provided a rich foundation for exploring varied enactments of learner agency in informal contexts.

Table 4. *Participant demographic profile*

Participant	Age	Major	Years of English Study	Weekly Podcast Use	Primary Learning Goal
Student 1	21	English Education	12	5 hours	IELTS preparation
Student 2	20	English Education	10	7 hours	Fluency development
Student 3	22	English Education	15	4 hours	Technical vocabulary
Student 4	19	English Education	8	6 hours	Professional communication
Student 5	23	English Education	11	10 hours	Academic writing
Student 6	20	English Education	9	3 hours	General proficiency
Student 7	21	English Education	13	5 hours	Academic discourse
Student 8	22	English Education	14	8 hours	Academic Writing

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and learner reflective journals, both designed to elicit insights into the three dimensions of agency: iterational, practical-evaluative, and projective.

Interviews were conducted individually via Zoom/Google Meet/In person, each lasting approximately 45–60 minutes. The interview protocol included open-ended questions addressing learners' language learning histories, current use of podcasts, learning strategies, decision-making processes, and future goals. The flexible format allowed for follow-up questions to probe deeper into participants' experiences.

Reflective journals were collected over a period of two weeks. This duration was determined through pilot testing with three non-participant learners, which revealed that meaningful patterns in vocabulary learning strategies and decision-making processes emerged within this timeframe, with data saturation typically occurring after 10-12 listening sessions. Participants were asked to document at least three podcast listening sessions focused on vocabulary learning, reflecting on what

they listened to, what vocabulary they engaged with, and how they made learning decisions.

To ensure consistency and depth, participants were provided with structured prompts, including: (1) What podcast episode did you listen to today, and why did you choose it? ((Consider your interests, goals, or current learning needs) (2) What new vocabulary did you encounter or focus on? (List at least 3-5 items) (3) What strategies did you use to understand or remember these words? (e.g., pausing, replaying, looking up definitions, writing notes, using context clues) (4) What challenges did you face, and how did you respond to them? (e.g., accent difficulties, speed, background noise, unfamiliar topics) (5) How does this episode relate to your learning goals? (e.g., exam preparation, career needs, personal interest)

These journals complemented the interview data by offering more situated and immediate accounts of learning practices. Participants were not compensated financially but were offered a summary of research findings and personalized feedback on their vocabulary learning strategies upon completion of the study.

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis as outlined by (Braun & Clarke, 2021), with the process guided by the theoretical framework of Priestley et al. (2015). To explore how agency was enacted in the context of podcast integration, a deductive coding approach was initially employed. This approach allowed for the identification of themes aligned with the three key dimensions of learner agency: iterational, practical-evaluative, and projective. Iterational codes captured references to past language learning experiences, personal beliefs, and prior exposure to digital tools. Practical-evaluative codes focused on current decisions, teaching strategies, and contextual factors influencing podcast use. Projective codes reflected future goals, imagined learning trajectories, and anticipated outcomes from podcast integration.

Once these broad categories were established, inductive sub-coding was used to capture emergent patterns and nuances within each dimension. Data from interviews and journals were cross-analyzed to identify consistencies and divergences across participants' experiences. To ensure trustworthiness, the researcher employed triangulation (using two data sources), member checking (participants were invited to verify and comment on their transcripts or emerging interpretations), and reflexive journaling to bracket researcher bias throughout the study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

EFL learners' agency in podcast-based vocabulary learning

Within the scope of this study, the practical-evaluative dimension of agency captures how EFL learners engage with podcasts for vocabulary development in the present moment—how they choose content, manage their time, utilize tools, and regulate their learning strategies. Thematic analysis of interview data and reflective journals revealed a number of recurring patterns that reflect the learners' agentic responses to their digital and informal learning environments. These sub-themes, grounded in participant narratives, illustrate the complex and dynamic ways in which learners navigate vocabulary learning through podcasts on a daily basis (Table 1).

Table 1. *Practical-evaluative dimension*

Sub-Theme	Description	Code(s)	Representative Quote
Strategic Content Selection	Learners deliberately select podcast episodes based on topic relevance, vocabulary level, or purpose.	content choice, topic relevance, vocab focus	"I prefer educational ones because I can collect academic vocabulary that I might use in essays." — Student 1
Personalized Vocabulary Techniques	Learners develop their own methods for identifying, recording, and reviewing new vocabulary.	note-taking, dictionary use, replay strategy	"I pause the podcast, Google the word, then write it in my notes app with an example sentence." — Student 2
Integration into Daily Life	Learners fit podcast listening into routines like commuting, chores, or leisure time.	multitasking, daily habit, flexible learning	"I listen to podcasts every morning when I'm making breakfast." — Student 3
Tool Combination and Digital Savviness	Learners use multiple tools (e.g., transcripts, AI apps, flashcards) alongside podcasts.	multi-tool use, digital strategy, resource use	"If I don't understand a word, I copy it into an AI chatbot for an explanation." — Student 4
Autonomy and Self-Regulation	Learners independently set goals, monitor progress, and	self-monitoring, goal-setting,	"I track new words weekly and test myself later to see if I

	adjust strategies based on reflection.	adaptation	remember them." — Student 5
Emotional and Motivational Factors	Emotional responses like enjoyment or boredom influence learners' podcast engagement and strategy.	affective engagement, motivation, frustration	"If I get bored with one podcast, I switch to another. I want learning to feel natural." — Student 6
Environmental Constraints	Learners manage challenges such as noise, time limits, or distractions in their learning spaces.	learning barriers, context management	"Sometimes I have to rewind a lot because my environment is noisy or I lose focus." — Student 7

The analysis revealed that learners' agency was prominently enacted through the decisions and adaptations they made in response to the conditions of their informal learning environments. In line with the practical-evaluative dimension of Priestley et al.'s (2015) ecological model, learners demonstrated an ability to make strategic choices and continuously negotiate how, when, and with what tools to engage in vocabulary learning through podcasts.

A key expression of agency was the learners' deliberate and goal-oriented selection of podcast content (Araos Moya & Damşa, 2023). Participants exercised discernment in choosing materials that aligned with their vocabulary goals, often prioritizing educational or topic-specific episodes over general entertainment. These choices were not arbitrary but reflected thoughtful evaluations of language input quality and relevance. This indicates that learners were not simply consuming digital content but actively curating their learning experiences based on perceived pedagogical value.

Learners also enacted agency through personalized vocabulary learning techniques (Brod et al., 2023), which emerged organically rather than being imposed by any curriculum. Rather than following uniform methods, participants devised individual strategies—pausing, replaying, translating, or notetaking—tailored to their comprehension needs. This demonstrates an internal locus of control, where learners adjusted their engagement with podcasts in real time, often combining listening with immediate vocabulary retrieval or storage. Such behaviors suggest that vocabulary learning was not incidental but intentionally orchestrated by the learners, highlighting their capacity to evaluate and respond to linguistic challenges as they arose.

These findings demonstrate that EFL learners enact practical-evaluative agency through strategic content selection that reflects both conscious evaluation of pedagogical value and alignment with personal learning objectives. For instance, Student 1's deliberate choice of academic podcasts for IELTS preparation exemplifies high-agency behavior, where content selection is neither passive nor arbitrary but actively filtered through goal-oriented criteria. This contrasts with Student 6, who reported more exploratory listening patterns driven primarily by topical interest rather than explicit vocabulary targets, suggesting that agency exists on a continuum and is shaped by individual learning orientations and contextual factors.

Another manifestation of present-focused agency was how learners integrated podcasts into their daily routines, transforming informal moments such as commuting or doing household chores into productive learning time. This flexible use of time indicates a form of temporal agency, where learners actively created opportunities to learn within the constraints of their personal schedules (Ajjawi et al., 2023). Their ability to embed learning into ordinary life reflects both autonomy and sustained motivation—essential components of agentic behavior in informal contexts.

Furthermore, the learners' engagement was facilitated and extended through the intentional use of digital tools in combination with podcasts. Participants did not rely solely on the podcast itself but employed supplementary technologies—such as dictionaries, language apps, and AI tools—to enhance their understanding and retention of vocabulary. This kind of multi-modal engagement demonstrates that learners were constructing their own digital learning ecosystems, drawing on a range of affordances to scaffold their experiences (Hsieh et al., 2022). The choice to mobilize external resources indicates evaluative judgment, technological literacy, and a forward-thinking approach to problem-solving in learning.

Self-regulation also played a crucial role in learners' agentic enactment. Several participants described routines of setting vocabulary goals, monitoring their progress, and adjusting strategies when outcomes fell short. These reflections and recalibrations reflect a

metacognitive dimension of agency, where learners not only act but also critically assess the effectiveness of their actions (Cuzzolino et al., 2023). This active self-monitoring reinforces the notion of agency as a situated and reflective process, rather than a fixed trait.

Finally, learners' emotional responses and motivational orientations influenced their ongoing engagement with podcasts. Participants associated podcast use with enjoyment, autonomy, and relevance—factors that enhanced their willingness to sustain learning outside formal instruction. At the same time, feelings of boredom or overload prompted some learners to adapt their podcast choices or change strategies. This suggests that learners were attentive not only to linguistic outcomes but also to the affective dimension of their learning, further emphasizing the complexity of agency in real-time informal settings.

Interestingly, not all digitally fluent learners demonstrated high levels of agency in podcast-based learning. Two participants (Students 6 and 8), despite reporting extensive prior experience with digital learning tools such as YouTube and language apps, exhibited more passive engagement patterns with podcasts. They tended to listen without systematic note-taking or vocabulary extraction strategies, suggesting that digital fluency alone does not automatically translate into agentic learning behavior. This finding underscores the distinction between technological familiarity and strategic learning agency, indicating that learners require not only access to tools but also metacognitive awareness and intentionality to fully leverage informal resources for vocabulary development.

Collectively, these findings demonstrate that EFL learners enact agency in informal, podcast-based vocabulary learning through a complex interplay of strategic decision-making, technological adaptability, time management, and emotional regulation. Their practices reflect more than the use of digital tools—they reveal an intentional, reflective, and context-sensitive approach to learning that is emblematic of the practical-evaluative dimension of agency.

Shaping of EFL learners' agentic podcast engagement by past experiences and future goals

In the context of this study, learners' engagement with podcasts for vocabulary development was not isolated from their educational background or previous language learning experiences. Instead, their present practices were deeply rooted in prior encounters with both formal and informal modes of learning, as well as in long-standing beliefs about effective language acquisition. The analysis revealed several sub-themes that illustrate how past learning contexts, strategies, and preferences continue to shape learners' current behaviors and attitudes.

Table 2. *Iterational dimension*

Sub-Theme	Description	Code(s)	Representative Quote
Prior Digital Learning Habits	Learners' past engagement with digital tools (e.g., YouTube, language apps) influences their current podcast use.	past tech use, digital familiarity	"I've always used YouTube to learn English, so using podcasts felt like the next step." — Student 1
Formal Learning Influences	Previous classroom-based vocabulary learning shapes learners' attitudes and strategies in informal settings.	classroom influence, contrast with school	"At school, I memorized word lists, but now I try to learn words in context through podcasts." — Student 2
Personal Language Learning Beliefs	Learners' long-standing beliefs about how languages are best learned guide their choices and behaviors.	language beliefs, learning philosophy	"I've always thought you learn more by listening than just reading a book." — Student 3
Resistance to Traditional Learning	Negative or disengaging experiences with formal instruction motivate learners to seek more flexible, autonomous methods.	disengagement, independence seeking	"In school, I felt restricted. Podcasts let me learn at my own pace without pressure." — Student 4
Recurrent Listening Behaviors	Established habits of re-listening to favorite podcast types or episodes stem from past learning patterns.	habitual learning, content familiarity	"I often go back to the same podcast series—it's familiar, and I know it helps me learn." — Student 5

The findings indicate that learners' present-day engagement with podcasts for vocabulary development is significantly shaped by their prior language learning experiences and established

learning orientations. In line with the iterational dimension of Priestley et al.'s (2015) ecological model of agency, participants did not approach informal podcast use in isolation; rather, their actions were influenced by previously formed habits, preferences, and beliefs that served as cognitive and affective reference points.

A central factor that shaped learners' agency was their prior engagement with digital tools (Han & Reinhardt, 2022). For many participants, the use of podcasts felt like a natural extension of earlier practices with platforms such as YouTube or language learning apps. This technological familiarity enabled them to approach podcast-based vocabulary learning with confidence and autonomy, without requiring formal instruction or support. These learners had already developed a degree of digital fluency, which allowed them to experiment with podcast formats, functionalities, and associated tools, demonstrating how past exposure to informal digital learning can cultivate readiness for self-directed engagement.

Equally influential were learners' prior experiences in formal educational settings, particularly vocabulary instruction. Some participants described past classroom vocabulary learning as rigid, exam-oriented, or disconnected from meaningful language use. These recollections shaped their current motivation to seek context-rich and personally relevant vocabulary through podcasts. One participant noted a deliberate departure from memorization-based methods, preferring the immersive and contextualized input that podcasts offer. Such transitions reveal a reflective reorientation toward learning methods perceived as more authentic and effective (Wang & Reynolds, 2024), grounded in dissatisfaction with previous approaches.

Learners' engagement was also anchored in deeply held beliefs about language learning (Sadoughi & Hejazi, 2023). Participants who believed that vocabulary is best acquired through exposure and listening were more inclined to see podcasts as a valid and even superior resource. These beliefs were not incidental; they were the result of long-standing reflections and personal theories developed over time through trial, feedback, and observation. The enactment of agency, in this sense, was not merely behavioral but ideologically driven (Sung, 2023), reflecting the learner's evolving epistemology of language learning.

Interestingly, some participants also articulated their resistance to traditional classroom learning, which they perceived as overly structured or misaligned with their personal learning styles. This resistance functioned as a motivational driver, prompting them to actively seek more flexible, autonomous avenues—such as podcasts—for vocabulary development. This highlights a form of agentic defiance (Sykes, 2024), where learners assert control over their learning paths by deliberately moving away from imposed models in favor of self-determined ones.

Finally, several learners demonstrated recurrent listening behaviors, such as re-engaging with familiar podcast series or episodes. These patterns reflected not only comfort with known materials but also strategic recycling of content that they found linguistically rich or pedagogically useful. This habit of returning to familiar resources indicates a form of temporal continuity in learning, where past effective practices are sustained and adapted over time.

These findings indicate that learners' agency arises not only from present contexts but is also significantly shaped by their accumulated past experiences, which can both support and limit their engagement (Priestley & Drew, 2019). The iterational dimension therefore plays a critical role in shaping how learners recognize, evaluate, and act upon the opportunities that podcasts afford for vocabulary development. Their past learning histories do not merely influence what they do, but also how they justify, adapt, and reflect on their learning decisions in informal digital spaces.

The projective dimension of agency, as defined by Priestley et al. (2015), concerns the ways in which individuals orient their present actions toward imagined futures. This includes aspirations, long-term goals, and anticipated roles that shape decision-making in the present. In this study, learners' engagement with podcasts for vocabulary development was not only informed by their past experiences or current circumstances, but also by their future-oriented visions of themselves as English users. The analysis revealed several sub-themes that illustrate how learners projected their goals into their learning practices, strategically aligning podcast use with academic, professional, and personal ambitions. These sub-themes are presented in the table below.

Table 3. *Projective dimension*

Sub-Theme	Description	Code(s)	Representative Quote
Vocabulary Goals for Specific Outcomes	Learners use podcasts to build vocabulary for exams, academic writing, or professional communication.	exam preparation, academic/professional use	"I'm preparing for IELTS, so I listen to podcasts with academic language and take notes." — Student 1
Vision of English-Speaking Self	Learners imagine themselves as confident English speakers in future roles, guiding their current behaviors.	language identity, confidence-building	"I want to sound fluent in conversations, so I pick podcasts with natural dialogue." — Student 2
Anticipated Academic/Professional Demands	Learners choose content and vocabulary that they expect will be useful in their future studies or careers.	career relevance, academic goals, future use	"I'm studying English Education, so I often listen to academic podcasts to learn subject-specific terms for teaching." --- Student 3
Long-Term Digital Learning Orientation	Learners see podcast use not only as a temporary strategy but as part of a sustainable lifelong learning habit.	lifelong learning, ongoing engagement	"Even after I finish university, I plan to keep using podcasts to keep up my English." — Student 4
Planning and Adjustment Toward Goals	Learners regularly set, review, and adjust vocabulary learning goals based on their long-term objectives.	goal review, adaptive planning, progress check	"I change the podcast type every few weeks depending on what I want to focus on." — Student 5

Learners' engagement with podcasts was frequently guided by anticipated future outcomes, revealing how the projection of academic, professional, and personal aspirations informed their vocabulary learning strategies. Consistent with the projective dimension of agency (Priestley et al., 2015), learners' choices were not solely grounded in current needs, but were shaped by forward-looking intentions that framed podcast use as an investment in future language use.

One prominent theme was learners' use of podcasts to prepare for specific language-related goals, such as proficiency exams or academic writing. This future-oriented purpose gave structure and focus to their podcast selection and listening behavior. For instance, one participant reported exclusively engaging with podcasts that contained academic discourse in order to expand the lexical repertoire required for the IELTS exam. This illustrates a goal-directed form of agency (Sung, 2023), where vocabulary acquisition is not incidental but purposefully aligned with a clearly defined linguistic target.

In addition, learners' actions were shaped by their vision of themselves as competent English speakers. This aspirational identity influenced not only the type of content they consumed but also how they evaluated their listening experiences. Some learners gravitated toward podcasts with spontaneous, conversational styles to better emulate natural speech patterns. Their engagement reflected more than vocabulary collection—it embodied an effort to align current practices with a desired future self-image. This supports previous work (Gaillard & Visser, 2022), suggesting that agency is not only about task execution but also about identity construction and future self-positioning.

Participants also demonstrated sensitivity to anticipated academic and professional demands, often choosing podcasts that offered discipline-specific terminology or discourse styles. For example, learners pursuing careers in science, business, or media intentionally listened to podcasts that mirrored the vocabulary and communication styles of those fields. This content alignment highlights a strategic filtering process whereby learners direct their attention to linguistic input perceived as relevant to future occupational or academic contexts, exercising agency through the careful tailoring of learning materials.

Another noteworthy expression of projective agency was the learners' view of podcast use as part of a long-term learning trajectory. Several participants indicated that they intended to continue using podcasts well beyond the scope of their current studies, seeing it as a sustainable and autonomous mode of language maintenance. This

orientation reflects an internalized sense of responsibility for continuous development (Noonan, 2024), extending the temporal scope of agency beyond immediate educational milestones.

Finally, learners' ability to plan, monitor, and adjust their learning in response to evolving goals further demonstrates the projective dimension of agency (Biesta et al., 2017). Participants described routinely revising their listening habits, switching between genres or levels of difficulty based on their changing language needs or perceived progress. This dynamic goal alignment shows that learners do not engage with podcasts in static or habitual ways; rather, their actions are governed by a recursive cycle of reflection and adaptation, grounded in projections of future competence.

In sum, the findings reveal that learners' podcast engagement is closely linked to their aspirational thinking and future-oriented language identities. The projective dimension of agency plays a central role in sustaining motivation, shaping content choices, and driving ongoing strategy refinement. By envisioning how current vocabulary learning connects to future goals, learners imbue their informal learning practices with purpose, direction, and personal meaning—hallmarks of agentic behavior in self-directed language learning.

Synthesis of agency dimensions

The analysis of learner agency through the lens of Priestley et al.'s (2015) ecological model reveals that EFL learners' engagement with podcasts for vocabulary development in informal contexts is not defined by isolated decisions or momentary preferences. Rather, it emerges as a dynamic, multi-dimensional process shaped by the interaction of past experiences, present contexts, and future aspirations.

The iterational dimension highlighted how learners' past language learning histories—both formal and informal—served as a foundation for their current engagement with podcasts (Priestley & Drew, 2019). Learners drew upon previous exposure to digital tools, classroom instruction, and personal learning beliefs, which collectively influenced their sense of what constitutes effective vocabulary learning. This temporal continuity illustrates that learners' present choices are not formed in a vacuum but are embedded in a broader learning biography that continues to shape their attitudes and strategies.

The practical-evaluative dimension revealed the situated, moment-to-moment judgments learners make as they navigate their podcast use (Thi Tran et al., 2023). From content selection and integration into daily life, to the strategic use of digital tools and self-monitoring behaviors, learners exhibited high levels of intentionality and flexibility. These practices demonstrate how learners exercise control over their learning environments and adapt to contextual constraints and affordances, reinforcing agency as a socially and materially situated phenomenon.

The projective dimension added a crucial forward-looking perspective (Priestley et al., 2016). Learners' actions were guided by imagined futures—academic goals, professional ambitions, and evolving language identities—which gave meaning and direction to their current vocabulary learning. Their ability to align podcast engagement with long-term aspirations reflects a form of strategic planning that goes beyond immediate utility, showing that learners act not only with awareness of where they have been and where they are, but also with a clear sense of where they intend to go.

When examined together, the three dimensions demonstrate that learner agency is not static or confined to a particular moment. It is an emergent property of learners' ability to integrate the past, respond to the present, and project into the future. The findings suggest that podcast-based vocabulary learning in informal contexts becomes a rich site for agentic expression, where learners construct their own paths, informed by history, responsive to context, and oriented toward desired futures. This triadic structure of agency underscores the complexity of learner decision-making and offers a robust framework for understanding self-directed language learning in digitally mediated environments.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study offer valuable implications across three levels: theoretical advancement, pedagogical practice, and educational policy. This study extends Priestley et al.'s (2015) ecological model of agency into the domain of digital informal learning, demonstrating its applicability beyond formal educational contexts. The findings reveal that agency in technology-mediated vocabulary learning operates through the same triadic temporal structure—drawing on past experiences, responding to present contexts, and projecting toward future goals—but

is uniquely shaped by the affordances and constraints of digital platforms. This contributes to our understanding of how agency functions in learner-initiated, self-directed environments where traditional instructional scaffolding is absent. Future research might test this framework in other informal digital contexts such as social media-based language learning, gaming communities, or mobile application use to further refine our understanding of digital learner agency.

For language educators, the study underscores the importance of acknowledging and actively supporting learners' engagement with informal tools such as podcasts, which have proven to foster motivation, autonomy, and vocabulary development outside the classroom.

The study also carries implications for institutional support and learning platform development.

By fostering environments that nurture learner agency across these levels—theoretical understanding, pedagogical practice, and systemic support—educators, researchers, and policymakers can contribute to more effective and empowering language learning experiences beyond traditional instructional boundaries.

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DECLARATION OF AI ASSISSTANCE

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