

Tuning into Learning: How Mini Podcasts Spark Focus, Dialogue, and Independence in Thematic Classrooms

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Abstract

This study aims to explore how mini podcasts are used as thematic learning media in grades 4–6 of elementary school, as well as their impact on learning attention, class discussions, and student independence. Using a qualitative approach with a case study design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews, learning documentation, and field observations at MI Bustanul Ulum 01. The analysis was carried out thematically using the Miles and Huberman model, which included data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion. The results of the study show that mini podcasts can increase students' initial focus, create a conducive learning atmosphere, and strengthen material retention. Additionally, these media encourage active participation in thematic discussions and enable students to learn independently outside of class hours. The study's implications suggest that mini podcasts are an effective alternative medium relevant for application in elementary schools, particularly in areas with technological limitations. These findings make an empirical and practical contribution to the development of audio learning media that is contextual and integrated with thematic approaches.

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INTRODUCTION

In the era of digital education transformation, teachers and researchers are increasingly highlighting the role of audio media, especially podcasts, as an accessible alternative to enrich the learning experience in primary schools (Moore, 2024; Savall Ceres & Villafán Amezcua, 2025; van den Berg et al., 2022). In many areas, limited internet infrastructure and access to digital devices are obstacles to the use of audiovisual media or online platforms (Botelho, 2021; Bushati & Bregu, 2023; Huda, 2023). Short-form mini podcasts that can be downloaded or played locally offer a practical solution because they do not require high bandwidth and do not overload the visual aspect (Firth & Marinelli, 2025; Jude, 2023; Soreny et al., 2022). This media enables teachers to present thematic material with an engaging narrative, while also providing students with the opportunity to re-listen independently. Mini podcasts can help reduce technological barriers while expanding learning spaces beyond the classroom. In the context of limited resources, the question arises as to what extent mini-podcasts are effective in supporting integrative and interactive thematic learning.

Previous research on podcasts in education has generally focused on higher education or online learning (Kelly et al., 2022; König, 2021; Yeh et al., 2021). Other research has also demonstrated that podcasts enhance students' ability to repeat material and improve audio retention (Kakhki et al., 2025; Kireitseva et al., 2025; Meden et al., 2024). Research conducted by Muffels & Van Weyenberg (2024) found that short podcasts in hybrid classes can maintain student concentration more effectively than long lectures. Colasante (2022) reviews the effectiveness of podcasts as additional material in online courses, with a record of success relying heavily on narrative design and its relationship to the core material. However, studies on the integration of

mini-podcasts in elementary school thematic learning are still limited, especially in facilitating class discussions and encouraging independent learning outside of class hours.

This gap indicates that research on mini-podcasts in the context of elementary schools remains minimal. Previous studies have tended to highlight aspects of retention and flexibility, rather than the role of podcasts in building early attention, discussion engagement, and learning independence in integrated thematic classrooms. In addition, the context of schools in areas with technological limitations has not been widely represented. Most studies also emphasize quantitative or survey approaches, so the experiences of teachers and students have not been explored in-depth and narratively. This research aims to fill this gap by exploring the function of mini podcasts not only as an additional medium, but also as a core medium that triggers attention, discussion, and independent learning in the real context of thematic learning in elementary school.

The purpose of this study is to explore the role of mini-podcasts in thematic learning in grades 4–6 of elementary school, focusing on three aspects: (1) attracting students' attention to learning, (2) facilitating thematic discussions in the classroom, and (3) supporting students' independent learning outside the classroom. This study expands the literature on audio learning media by including the context of basic education and resource limitations. The results are expected to provide empirical insights for teachers, curriculum developers, and policymakers on utilizing podcasts as an effective and contextual medium for thematic learning.

The primary focus of this research is to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences of teachers and students in using mini podcasts as a thematic learning medium. This study not only measures effectiveness but also captures how audio narratives become important mediators in shaping attention, class discussions, and learning independence. Through a qualitative approach, this study reveals the subjective meaning and dynamics of interaction in the classroom using podcasts. The next section of methodology describes the procedures for selecting informants, collecting data, and systematic analysis techniques. This research is expected to enrich the literature on audio media in education and provide practical guidelines for implementing podcasts in elementary schools, particularly in areas with technological limitations.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a case study design that focuses on the use of mini-podcasts as a thematic learning medium in elementary schools (Cleland et al., 2021; Errida & Lotfi, 2021; Tlili et al., 2023). This design was chosen because it enables an in-depth exploration of specific contexts and learning practices that are not accessible through quantitative approaches. The research is located at MI Bustanul Ulum 01, a madrasah ibtidaiyah that has begun to integrate simple technology into learning. A qualitative approach is employed to capture the subjective meaning, direct experiences, and social-pedagogical dynamics in the classroom (Cleland et al., 2021; Magolda, 2007; Tlili et al., 2023). This approach explains the complexity of teacher-student interaction in utilizing audio media contextually. The theoretical foundation is based on constructivism, which emphasizes the active role of students in building meaning through learning experiences, aligning with the exploratory goals of this study.

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews, documentation, and direct observation. Interviews were conducted with classroom teachers and students to explore perceptions, experiences, and responses to the use of mini-podcasts. Documentation, including lesson plans, podcast transcripts, and teacher notes, is used to link planning with implementation and strengthen triangulation. Observations include students' interactions, expressions, and verbal responses during the learning process. The researcher acts as the primary instrument through the observation of participants with limited involvement while maintaining analytical distance. The research lasted for two months at MI Bustanul Ulum 01. The credibility of the data is maintained through the triangulation of methods and sources, as well as the examination of members to informants. This step ensures the interpretation is consistent with the participant's experience.

Data analysis employs a thematic approach, utilizing Miles and Huberman's interactive

models, which encompass data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing or verification (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018; Kawar et al., 2024; Zakaria & Ab Rahman Muton, 2022). At the reduction stage, interview transcripts and field notes are coded to identify key themes such as learning attention, thematic discussion, and learning independence. The data is then presented in a thematic matrix to see patterns and relationships between categories. Conclusions were drawn iteratively, with cross-verification against initial data (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Morgan & Nica, 2020; Orakçı et al., 2023). The accuracy of interpretation is enhanced through the triangulation of sources and confirmation with participants. This procedure results in not only a descriptive, but also an analytical and contextual understanding of the dynamics of mini-podcast use in thematic learning.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

Mini Podcasts as Learning Attention Reinforcement Media

Attention to learning is an early aspect of the learning process that greatly determines the extent to which students can receive, process, and remember information. In the context of primary school students, attention to learning depends heavily on the use of interesting stimuli, taking into account their age characteristics and learning style. Mini podcasts, as thematic and narrative-based audio media, can offer a personalized, familiar, and contextual learning experience. The sound, intonation, and storyline in the podcast help students focus more on the material from the beginning of learning. Unlike visual or text media that demand a higher cognitive load, mini-podcasts work linearly and directionally, allowing students to listen without being distracted by other visual elements. Thus, mini-podcasts serve not only as an alternative medium but also as a primary means to build students' concentration and attention in an ongoing manner within thematic learning.

Students' attention to thematic learning increases when the material is delivered through narrative audio media. The 5th-grade teacher at MI Bustanul Ulum 01, Desi Dwi Kanti, emphasized that students become more focused and enthusiastic when listening to podcasts due to the clear and easy-to-understand presentation format. *"The application of mini podcast media in grade 5 thematic learning at MI Bustanul Ulum 01 Mlokorejo makes a positive contribution in improving students' listening skills and understanding of the material taught... Students are encouraged to actively listen, understand the relationship between concepts, and discuss to deepen the material (I_DDK)."* One of the students also described his experience in participating in learning using podcasts: *"When I first learned to use podcasts, I was confused. However, over time, I started to like it, because it sounds exciting, like listening to a story. I have to listen carefully so that I understand, because if I do not focus, I will not know what the story is about (I_AH)."*

From interviews with teachers and students, it is evident that the use of mini-podcasts significantly contributes to maintaining students' attention consistently during thematic learning. The teacher noted a change in the listening pattern from passive to more active, as students followed the flow of the material more effectively. Students also said that the voice and form of the story in the podcast made them interested and focused from the beginning of the learning. The narrative structure in the podcast provides a suggestive effect that naturally directs students' attention. Because podcasts are delivered linearly, students are encouraged to listen without pause in order to understand the content of the material in its entirety. This condition creates a more targeted learning environment and minimizes external distractions. Thus, mini podcasts not only serve as a medium for delivering information, but also as a tool that supports students' mental readiness and concentration from the beginning of the learning session.

The study also found that the classroom atmosphere became more lively and conducive since teachers used mini-podcasts in thematic learning. The majority of students are more focused from the start. They show attention through an upright sitting position, a serious expression when listening, and a quick response to questions after the podcast has played. The teacher noted that students no longer chat much when the material is delivered through podcasts, in contrast to the

lecture method. Students also appear to be more prepared to participate in follow-up activities, such as group discussions, after listening to podcasts. These findings reinforce the role of mini-podcasts as practical early triggers for attracting and retaining students' attention. Audio with a narrative structure provides a learning rhythm that guides students' focus from the beginning to the end of the session, ensuring a consistent and engaging learning experience. Building on these findings, the strengthening of learning attention through mini-podcast media is illustrated in Figure 1.

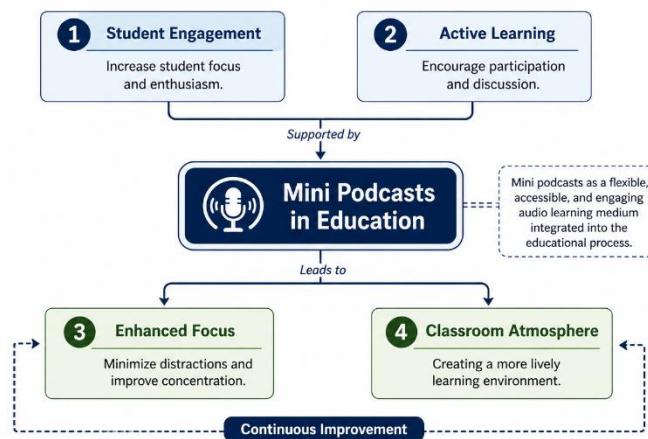


Figure 1. Improve Learning Attention with Mini Podcasts
(Source : Authors Synthesis)

Figure 1 illustrates the primary role of the mini-podcast in enhancing students' attention to learning in the classroom. The visuals demonstrate how the mini-podcast enhances student engagement, promotes active learning, and fosters a more focused and conducive classroom atmosphere. The "Student Engagement", "Active Learning", and "Enhanced Focus" elements describe the function of podcasts as a medium that captures attention from the start and maintains it throughout the learning process. The "Classroom Atmosphere" aspect emphasizes that narrative audio helps minimize distractions and build a more lively learning environment. The combination of these components shows that mini podcasts are not only a means of delivering material, but also play a strategic role in increasing students' concentration and participation in thematic learning.

The use of mini-podcasts in thematic learning has been proven effective in enhancing the attention span of elementary school students. This audio media provides an engaging auditory stimulus from the beginning, through narratives that are contextual, expressive, and suitable for elementary school-age children. Mini podcasts are not only able to attract attention, but also maintain it throughout the learning process. Teachers believe that students focus more quickly, are less easily distracted, and demonstrate mental readiness to participate actively in discussions or follow-up assignments. This is reflected in the behavior of students who listen attentively, display serious expressions, and independently ask for repetition when there are parts that are not understood. These findings confirm that mini podcasts function not only as a tool, but also as a pedagogical instrument that can create more focused, comfortable, and enjoyable learning conditions in the elementary school environment.

Mini Podcast on Encouraging Student Discussion

Discussion is a learning method that requires not only an understanding of the material but also practical communication skills, critical thinking, and the ability to express opinions. In thematic learning, discussions are a crucial means of building connections between subjects and teaching students to express their ideas in an integrated manner. Mini-podcasts, as narrative audio

media, serve as an effective initial trigger in preparing students for discussions. Narratives that are constructed thematically and contextually provoke students' initial responses, foster curiosity, and create a level playing field for all students to understand the topics being discussed. With engaging and visually unburdening delivery, podcasts allow students to efficiently absorb information and process it in the form of questions or responses during discussions.

The use of mini-podcasts not only helps students' initial understanding but also encourages the emergence of more active and meaningful discussions in thematic learning. MI 5th-grade teacher Bustanul Ulum 01 said that students were encouraged to express their opinions and relate the content of the podcast with other materials in an integrated manner. *"Through narratives or stories that are relevant to the learning theme, students not only listen, but are also invited to relate the content of the podcast with other lessons such as Indonesian, PPKn, Science, or Social Studies in an integrated manner... Students are encouraged to actively listen, understand the relationships between concepts, and discuss to deepen the material (I_DDK)."* One of the students also revealed that the engaging content of the podcast made it easier to participate in class discussions: *"I have to listen carefully so that I understand the problem. If I do not focus, I will not know what the story is about. Now I am more enthusiastic about learning (I_AH)"*.

From the results of the interviews, the mini-podcast not only presents the material engagingly but also serves as a bridge for students to enter an active and reflective discussion. The teacher noted that after listening to the podcast, students were better prepared to relate the content of the narrative to various lessons incorporated into the theme, such as Indonesian, Science, and Social Studies. This shows that podcasts provide a unifying context, allowing students to have an equal footing for discussion. The students, in their quotes, pointed out that their understanding of the podcast's content was key to being able to follow the discussion. In other words, listening to podcasts becomes the initial stage that determines their cognitive and emotional readiness to participate actively. This means that mini podcasts are not only a tool for delivering material, but also strategic media that build a collaborative and integrated discussion atmosphere within a thematic learning framework. Departing from this, the form of discussion activities that emerged in response to the use of mini-podcasts in thematic learning is presented in **Table 1**.

Table 1. Discussion Activities Triggered by Mini Podcasts

Discussion Activities	Student Interaction	Student Engagement
Respond to the content of a podcast story by linking to other lessons	Students mention science and PPKn lessons when commenting on the content of the podcast	Students think across subjects independently
Ask the teacher about the intent of the narration or characters in the podcast.	Students ask for clarification about the content of the story conveyed	Students are cognitively and verbally active
Give an opinion during a group discussion about the value of the story	Students express their personal views and listen to their peers	There is an exchange of ideas and mutual respect
Respond to a friend's opinion with a reference from a podcast	The student quotes the podcast section to support his argument	Showing understanding and courage to speak up
Create reflective questions after the podcast is over	Students asked, "What if such an incident happened around us?"	Students relate the material to real-life contexts.

Table 1 describes the different forms of discussion activities that emerged in response to students' use of mini-podcasts in learning. Each activity demonstrates that podcasts serve not only as a medium for conveying information but also as a trigger for interaction and cognitive engagement. Activities such as responding to the content of the story by relating to other lessons reflect the ability to think across subjects. Asking questions to teachers and expressing opinions in group discussions shows courage and active verbal participation of students. Responding to a friend's opinion by referring back to the content of the podcast signifies a deep understanding. Meanwhile, reflective questions following the listening to podcasts revealed a connection between the material and real-life contexts.

Mini podcasts not only serve as a medium for delivering material but also as an effective trigger for encouraging student discussion in the classroom. Narratives that are structured contextually and aligned with the lesson theme provide a strong initial stimulus for students to actively process information and share it in the form of responses, questions, and opinions. The teacher noted that students became more prepared and confident in expressing their views after listening to the podcast. The students' responses also demonstrated an effort to relate the podcast content to other lessons, as well as the courage to engage in a critical and open dialogue. These findings confirm that the use of mini-podcasts enhances the dynamics of thematic discussions in elementary classes by providing a solid foundation for understanding and stimulating active engagement, both cognitively and socially. Thus, mini podcasts have proven to be a strategic medium in forming participatory and reflective learning spaces at the elementary school level.

Mini Podcast as a Means of Independent Learning

Independent learning is the ability of students to organize, direct, and monitor their learning process actively without direct dependence on teachers. In thematic learning, which combines multiple subjects, students require flexible and adaptive learning strategies. Mini podcasts, with their compact, accessible, and portable playback characteristics, provide space for students to learn at their own pace and according to their needs. This medium enables students to review material they have misunderstood, reinforce important concepts, and independently engage in the learning process outside of school hours. Podcasts also support auditory learning styles and provide a more personalized learning experience.

Interviews with several informants revealed that the use of mini-podcasts has made a real contribution to fostering independent learning habits in elementary school students. The teacher emphasized the importance of habituation and early guidance so that students not only listen passively but also critically process the content of the podcast. This indicates that self-learning is not an instantaneous process, but instead requires a structured and consistent learning approach. Meanwhile, students showed a positive response to their ability to repeat podcast material outside of class, according to their level of understanding. Flexible podcast access encourages them to build control over their own learning process. These findings reinforce that mini podcasts are not just an additional medium, but have been transformed into personalized learning tools that accommodate students' individual rhythms, needs, and learning styles, as well as an important element in strengthening self-reliance-based thematic learning.

Table 2. Forms of Learning Independence

Aspects	Implementation	Thematic Learning
Initiative to repeat the material independently	Students replay podcasts at home without the teacher's direction	Strengthen understanding of the lesson content in a structured way
Flexible study time arrangements	Students listen to podcasts outside of class hours	Adapting the pace of learning to the complexity of the theme
Self-evaluation of material comprehension	Students ask questions in class after re-listening to podcasts at home	Deepen mastery of themes through reflective questions
Independence in listening and note-taking strategies	Students record the content of the podcast while studying at home	Build connections between thematic topics in auditory learning styles
Adaptation to limited means	Students use their parents' cellphones to learn with podcasts	Demonstrate responsibility and learning flexibility

Students utilize mini-podcasts not only in the classroom, but also actively at home as part of their self-study habits. Based on teacher documentation and learning notes, some students consciously replay podcasts through a parent's device, especially when they do not yet understand the material. The teacher noted that students began to show learning initiatives before the face-to-face session, for example, coming to class with questions related to the podcast's content. This indicates that podcasts have become a habit of continuous learning outside the classroom. Students with auditory learning style tendencies also appear to be more prominent in understanding and

reinterpreting material. This activity reinforces the finding that mini-podcasts provide space for students to set their own learning rhythms and strategies. With easy access and contextual content, mini podcasts are an effective bridge in forming independent learning habits in elementary school students. Building on this, the form of independent learning that arises from the use of mini-podcasts is presented in **Table 2**.

Table 2 describes the various forms of student learning independence that emerge through the use of mini-podcasts in thematic learning. The independence aspect is evident in the students' initiative to review the material independently at home without the teacher's instructions, demonstrating a high level of learning awareness. Flexible study timings demonstrate students' ability to adjust the learning rhythm to the difficulty of the theme. Self-evaluation is reflected when students actively ask questions in class after re-listening to podcasts, indicating a process of reflection on the understanding of the material. Additionally, the strategy of listening and taking notes independently helps students build connections between topics audibly. Adaptation to limited means, such as using parents' cellphones, shows their responsibility and flexibility in learning.

Mini podcasts have contributed to shaping independent learning patterns in elementary school students, especially in the context of thematic learning that demands interconnection between subjects. Students not only listen to the material as learning progresses, but also actively re-access podcasts outside of school hours to reinforce their understanding. This initiative demonstrates the growth in the ability to manage learning time, evaluate comprehension independently, and utilize learning strategies that suit their individual style, such as reviewing and noting important points. Even in limited facilities, students show adaptability by utilizing family devices to keep learning. These findings confirm that mini podcasts are not just a medium for repeating material, but have become a flexible, personalized, and empowering learning tool.

Discussion

This study found that the use of mini-podcasts in thematic learning in elementary school students had three main impacts: (1) increasing attention to learning from the beginning of learning, (2) encouraging student involvement in class discussions, and (3) strengthening learning independence outside the classroom. Contextual and themed audio narration has been proven to capture students' focus, spark active participation in discussions, and encourage them to repeat the material independently. These findings suggest that mini-podcasts not only serve as teaching aids but have evolved into effective pedagogical means to accommodate auditory learning styles, support integration between subjects, and create student-centered learning spaces. With the flexibility of access and depth of narrative content, mini-podcasts significantly extend the reach of learning from the classroom to the home environment.

The results of this study support previous studies that affirmed the role of audio media in increasing student motivation and understanding (Al-Marouf et al., 2022; L. Chen, 2023; Laksmi et al., 2021). However, the main contribution of this research lies in the application of mini-podcasts in thematic learning, an area that is still rarely studied in the context of basic education. While Chen (2023) highlights the flexibility of podcasts as a source of independent learning, this study adds a new dimension: podcasts as a spark for thematic discussion engagement in elementary grades. Different from studies that focus on online learning or language learning, this study expands the understanding of the effectiveness of podcasts in face-to-face classroom interactions. The findings also address the existing literature gap regarding the use of digital media in areas with technological limitations, demonstrating that mini podcasts can be a practical and applicable solution.

The analysis of these findings can be explained through Cognitive Load Theory and Constructivism Theory. From the perspective of Cognitive Load Theory (O. Chen et al., 2023; Evans et al., 2024; Sweller, 2023), mini podcasts present information in a linear and structured manner, thereby reducing visual burden and unnecessary complexity. This allows students to focus

more on listening and understanding the material without excessive distractions. From the constructivist perspective, Roth et al. (2023) suggest that students build understanding through podcast narration that is associated with the experiences and concepts they already possess. Podcasts also serve as a means of self-reflection and exploration, reinforcing the process of active and student-centered learning. These findings demonstrate that the use of mini-podcasts aligns with both theories, while expanding theoretical contributions on the role of audio media in facilitating cognitive processing and supporting the development of deeper meaning in thematic learning.

This research confirms that mini podcasts are a practical learning media innovation in the context of thematic learning in elementary schools. Through an audio-narration-based approach, podcasts can build learning attention early on, enable student participation in discussions, and encourage independent learning outside the classroom. A significant contribution to this research lies in the integration of these three aspects into a single medium that is flexible, cost-effective, and adaptable to technological limitations. Theoretically, this study strengthens the relevance of cognitive load theory and constructivism in the context of audio media. Practically, this study provides alternative learning media that cater to the needs of basic education in diverse geographical and social contexts. This research contributes to the existing literature on the use of podcasts in education. It provides a contextual implementation model with the potential to be developed on a broader scale in the future.

CONCLUSION

This study confirms that mini-podcasts are an effective learning medium for strengthening attention to learning, increasing discussion engagement, and fostering student independence in thematic learning in elementary school. The three main findings align with the research objectives, which aim to explore the role of mini podcasts as an alternative media that are adaptable to student characteristics and basic educational conditions. The use of thematic, narrative-based podcasts has been proven to create a more focused, participatory, and flexible learning process, making it relevant for application in contexts with limited infrastructure. This research contributes to the development of audio-media-based learning strategies and expands the understanding of integrating simple technology into classroom practice. These findings not only enrich the study of innovative learning media but also open up opportunities for further research on the long-term impact of podcasts in strengthening thematic literacy and differentiating student learning styles.

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