

Students' Perceptions on the Use of TED Talks for English Language Learning

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Abstract

This article presents survey data from 26 under graduate students of the commerce background for using lessons based on TED talks for English language learning. The objective of the study was to determine students' perceptions of a) teachers' usefulness and facilitative behaviour during the lesson, b) the relevance and the usefulness of the lesson, c) the effect of TED lesson on the communication skills and confidence level of the students. Students attributed an important role to instructors and perceived that not only listening but all in all their communication skills along with confidence enhanced to a great extent by doing activities based on TED talks. A good deal of importance was given to the role of multimedia and to the use of authentic videos in making the learning experience enjoyable and interesting.

TED stands for Technology, Entertainment and design. It started in 1984 as a conference for giving a common platform to the people from the worlds of Technology, Entertainment and design. But leveraging the technological tools, soon a simple idea turned into a global project in spreading the inspirational and motivational messages of the influential people to the masses and rechristened as TED Talks. They share the thought-provoking ideas, as its motto claims, "ideas worth spreading" through short video talks ranging from children to business to global issues. These short talks provide a great platform for the classroom discussions and offer many different kinds of educational experiences which can be creative, exciting and rewarding for the students. Since the talks are relatively short (18 minutes or less), deal with the most pressing issues of the day, and are packed with interesting ideas and inherently shareable information that can be used as classroom activities for English language acquisition. It's no wonder that they're catching up popularity and are embraced by all language learners and teachers across the world.

The activities after the audio-visual stimulation help in retaining the information for long. Therefore, the tasks should be carefully planned in order to help the learners comprehend the information completely. Here are some ways in which TED Talks can be used to their full advantage to engage the students in the classroom activities.

1. Use TED Talks to Spark discussions

The most obvious way to use TED Talks in the classroom is to show talks that relate in some way to the subject they study. Following which the students can be engaged in conversations and discussions based on the topic.

2. Make the most of the TED-Ed Platform

TED is well aware of its potential utility to the world of education so has devoted an entire website, ed.ted.com to using TED in the classroom. It is a powerful platform that helps one to create entire lessons around specific TED Talks, meaning that any given talk can be certainly incorporated into another lesson. This means TED-ED is an especially powerful tool if one has flipped the classroom, though it is also highly effective in creating compelling homework.

After finding the relevant talk, one can use the “Share” feature to add context to the video or define learning objectives for the students. In the “Think” section multiple choice questions or pose open-ended questions can be added for the students to ponder. In the “Dig Deeper” section one can add links to articles, references, and the class blog. Using these tools, one can provide a deeper context for the talk, encourage students to engage rather than just watching passively, and spark deeper discussion both online and in the classroom.

One can also browse teachers’ lesson plans, or share one’s own and see it featured on the site. URLs can even be customised for the class discussion so that they can be shared exclusively with one’s students. Best of all, student progress can be tracked to see who’s on board and who needs help. It’s all of the best collaborative and engagement tools right next to the best ideas around.

3. Make One’s Own TED-Ed Club

TED-Ed Clubs makes running your own mini-TED event easy:

Just fill out an application on the TED-Ed site and the organization will send a free set of tools, including 13 suggested meeting topics. In these meetings, students will learn all about what makes a great TED Talk and will work on practicing their speech writing and presenting skills until they’re ready to put on an event of their own. In so doing, students will not only gain confidence in their own ideas, but they’ll also be learning a lot about writing, discussion, and storytelling — skills one can translate into more traditional essay writing and analysis in other settings.

And above all, the best speeches of the students can submitted to be featured on TED-Ed, where the student might win a presenter’s slot at TED Youth. That may work as a great confidence booster.

4. Write a Review

Students can be told to prepare a review of the Video they have seen, with keen observation on the speaker’s ideas and presentation style.

5. Create a TED Talks Unit

Underpinning all of these ideas is the concept of having students not only brainstorm great ideas but also put them together in a compelling, cogent, and convincing manner. The TED-Ed Clubs packet will go a long way in helping your students do just that — but why not also devote an entire unit just to teaching these kinds of storytelling skills directly?

From writing a thesis to making eye contact with an audience, a TED Talk unit will drive important lessons home. Use your TED Talks unit as a way to teach your students argument, rhetoric, and presentation skills — skills that should permeate throughout their writing and other college work.

The TED Talk format is great too: talks are relatively short, deal with the most pressing issues of the day, and are packed with interesting ideas and inherently shareable information. It's no wonder that they're embraced by all kinds of learners in every stage of life across the world.

Description of the Lesson

Students participating in the present study were under graduate commerce students enrolled in a 30- hour Foundation course in English Language at University College, Ghanaur. During their course they were given three TED based lessons. One of the lessons is being described as follows. The lesson based on Chetna Gala's TED talk titled "How women in Rural India turned courage into capital" was planned in three stages of Pre-Listening, Listening and Post-Listening and was covered in their class. Since most of the students in the course are female themselves and hail from the villages in the vicinity of the college and are from the commerce background, the teacher researcher intentionally chose the particular talk, keeping their personal and professional interests in the mind.

At the pre-watching/listening stage, the students were initially told only about the title and were introduced to the speaker and her domain. Following which, they were asked to predict about the talk and some questions about the problems faced by women in general and by women from rural India in particular. After discussion for about ten minutes, the students were given a list of Vocabulary words from the talk itself and then were asked to predict about the theme of the talk based on the key words. It has been found in the research that the students in the language classrooms are directly exposed to the listening activity without giving any introduction to the topic. Underwood (1989) believes that it would not be fair to draw students straight into the listening without introducing the topic or the type of activity they are going to work on. Therefore, "preparatory work" (Underwood, 1989, p.31) or pre-listening activity which enables the learners to deal with the following listening text, is very important. At this stage, the learners are prepared to achieve the most from the passage in order to make them think, write and discuss everything they know about the topic, employing techniques such as prediction, semantic mapping to activate schema. A schema is the organized knowledge that one has about people, places, things, events and even for how text's work.

At the second stage of the lesson, the students were asked to watch and listen to the talk by Chetna Gala titled "How women in Rural India turned courage into capital" and check if their ideas match with those in the video. If not, how are they different? Besides, they were given the transcript

with the keywords missing and asked to insert them as they listen. Listening is the basic ingredient of effective communication. Mendelsohn (1995) believes that since listening forms up to 50% of communication time, the crucial role of listening in learning and teaching language cannot be side stepped.

In the Post-Watching/Listening stage, the students were divided into pairs and groups and were given following tasks to encourage them to use the language they focused on in the previous stage.

1. **Role-play** Interview the speaker. The students were told to think of the questions they might ask the speaker based on what they have listened to. Role play as a journalist and Ms. Chetna Gala. Students should be encouraged to use the new phrases and words learnt during the activity to persuade the journalist or make a point.
2. **Debate** Write a few controversial statements of the board and divide students in to 'for' and 'against' teams. They should work together to think of how they are going to justify their points and then have a debate.
3. **Write a review** What did they think of the TED talk? Did they agree or disagree with the points made? Was the speaker convincing? Did they find it inspiring?

The Study

Data-Gathering Technique

Common approaches to understanding perceptions include the use of questionnaires, focus groups, and interviews. While each of these approaches provides good information, questionnaires may be the best way to assess perceptions because they can be completed anonymously and administered to assess changes in individuals' experiences and thinking over time. A questionnaire is a system for collecting information to describe, compare, and explain knowledge, attitudes, perceptions, or behaviour. Therefore, at the end of the course, a questionnaire on student perceptions about the TED talk based lessons was administered to the students.

The study was designed to elicit answers to the following questions:

1. What role did the instructor play in the lesson, and how important was the instructor's presence?
2. Was the lesson relevant, enjoyable and useful to the students?
3. Did students perceive that they gained confidence and improved their communication skills as a result of the lesson based on TED talk?

The questionnaire contained 15 statements with which students were asked to indicate whether they strongly agreed, agreed, disagreed, or strongly disagreed. These statements elicited information about students' perceptions in three categories: a) teachers' usefulness and facilitative behaviour during the lesson, b) the relevance and the usefulness of the lesson, c) the effect of TED lesson on the communication skills and confidence level of the students

Results and Discussion

For the purposes of this article, data are reported in numbers and percentages of student responses for each statement.

Teacher Usefulness or Facilitation: More than 89% of the students agreed or strongly agreed that the instructor interacted with the students to facilitate difficulties with the activity. Students also believed that the instructor provided other kinds of language assistance, with 88% agreeing (34% of the total respondents agreeing strongly) that the instructor provided vocabulary help. Over 85% agreed that the instructor interacted with them to facilitate difficulties in the pronunciation. Over 85% also agreed that having an instructor present during the lab increased learning potential in the class. Moreover, for a small majority of students, the need for instructor facilitation did not seem to decrease after initial learning curve demands were met. Over half (54.2%) disagreed with the statement, "Once I learned how to do the activities, the presence of the instructor was not necessary." Students strongly perceived that their teachers facilitated instruction and that they were important to the learning environment. This perception corresponds to conclusions by other researchers like Glisan et al. conclude that teacher behaviours such as conducting review lessons, stimulating students to respond during lessons, and offering praise are important in the learning process. Kern states that "the degree to which computer-mediated communication promotes language and content learning, cultural awareness, and critical reflection depends fundamentally on the teachers who coordinate its use" (p. 118).

Relevance and Usefulness of the Lesson: Almost 71% of the students felt that they invested more time on the TED based lesson than they would have in a regular English class. Slightly over 36% "strongly agreed" with this response. They particularly enjoyed the task presented through multimedia and 56% cited it as an important factor in the achievement of the objective of the task. The results are in line with the findings of the other ELT researchers such as Selwyn & Gordard, 2003, who believed that the use of multimedia technologies in educational institutions is seen as necessary for keeping education relevant to the twenty-first century. Educators have heralded the advent of multimedia technologies as a catalyst for change in traditional teaching practices; to innovate and improve on traditional practices (LeFoe, 1998; Relan & Gillani, 1997). One of the ultimate goals of multimedia language teaching is to promote students' motivation and learning interest, which can be a practical way to get them involved in the language learning (Thamarana, 2015). 82% stated that listening to an authentic video quoting real life examples has a very positive impact on them. 74% believed that overall the entire package of the lesson comprising of pre-listening, listening and post listening activities was an enjoyable experience for them. 84% of the students agreed and strongly agreed that the pre-listening activities helped them in the better comprehension of the talk. Though more than 56% students felt that the preparation time given to them for the post listening activities was quite less. Slightly less than half of the respondents (48%) said that, if given a choice between a regular English lesson from the book and a TED based lesson, they would take the latter.

Communication Skills and Confidence: Students seemed to believe that the lab activities were beneficial to their communicative skills, although the majority expressed only moderate

agreement with these statements. Almost two-thirds agreed that their listening skills and speaking skills had improved in English as a result of the activity (65.9% and 63.4%, respectively). A majority (54%) also believed that they had gained confidence in their ability to interact and communicate effectively.

Conclusion

It can be concluded from the study that TED talks can be used to make the language learning lessons interesting and enjoyable, though care needs to be taken while selecting the talk, planning the pre and post listening and watching activities and the time management. The students' survey results suggested that the majority of the students seemed to have positive attitudes towards the use of Multimedia Technologies in English language education. The findings also suggest that TED talks supported language learning by bringing improvement in the learners' reading, speaking and above all listening skills. Besides, the lessons help in increasing learner motivation and in the understanding of concepts.

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