

Teaching Practice

TED Talks as an Extensive Listening Resource for EAP Students

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Abstract

This study examines how TED (Technology, Entertainment and Design) Talks, used as an extensive listening material, affected college students' listening skills, and explores strategies to tailor the activity for lower-proficiency students. The qualitative data analysis, based on two surveys and students' journal entries, indicates that students felt the lectures improved their listening comprehension, enhanced their motivation, and accustomed them to listening to a variety of English accents. Finally, assisting students to select lectures appropriate to their comprehension levels and conducting various types of scaffolding activities for lower proficiency students are discussed.

TED Talks and EAP Students

Since 1984, TED Talks has featured lectures from around the world on technology, entertainment, and design. These lectures are available to the general public and have been used by educators since going online in 2007 (TED Talks, n.d.). Free transcripts in English and subtitles in over 40 languages accompany most of the lectures, delivered by native and non-native English speakers.

At a private liberal arts college in Tokyo, TED lectures were used as an extensive listening resource in a new academic speaking and listening course in conjunction with journal writing. As the lectures were a core listening task, their efficacy was gauged for future classes.

To accomplish this, the following research questions were developed:

1. How do students view the effectiveness of the activity in regards to their listening skills?
2. What other benefits are engendered?
3. If the activity does not improve listening skills, what are the causes and how could these causes be addressed?

The paper will begin with an overview of some recent trends in the teaching of listening in the EFL / ESL arena. The definition, purpose, and benefits of extensive listening practice will be explored, followed by details of how the TED lectures were incorporated into an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) course. Finally, survey results on students' perceptions of the efficacy

of the activity and strategies to facilitate the task for students at lower comprehension levels will follow.

Literature Review

Listening as Part of EFL / ESL Teaching and Views on Listening Processes

Referring to the paucity of attention allotted to listening practice in the foreign language classroom, Nunan stated, "Listening is the Cinderella skill in second language learning. All too often, it has been overlooked by its elder sister—speaking" (2002, p. 238). Foreign language teaching mainly focuses on productive skills: speaking and writing. Listening and reading, considered secondary skills, are often neglected, although they provide essential input to learners and therefore are vital to their productive skills. However, listening is currently receiving more attention (Field, 2002; Nunan, 2002; Wallace, 2010).

The two prominent views on the process of listening influencing language pedagogy since the 1980s are the bottom-up top-down processes (Nunan, 2002, p. 239). The former view holds that listeners' understanding of what they hear begins with the smallest units of sounds. These sounds are combined to form words, phrases, clauses, and sentences to become concepts. In this process, listeners apply various types of knowledge in a "hierarchical" manner in order to make sense of the incoming message (Flowerdew & Miller, 2005, p. 24). The top-down-process view, on the other hand, holds that listeners actively reconstruct the meaning of incoming sounds using their pre-existing knowledge of context (Richards, 2003).

Most researchers concur that both processes are necessary for effective learning (Flowerdew & Miller, 2005; Nunan, 2002; Wallace, 2010). As decoding alone allows learners only literal interpretations of the input, learners need to be guided to use what they already know to help them make sense of what they hear (Wallace, 2010). When students appear to lack contextual knowledge, some form of schema-building activities is recommended before the listening process starts to help learners prepare for a more meaningful listening experience (Richards, 2003).

Increased Use of Authentic Materials

Another trend in the teaching of listening is the increased use of authentic materials as opposed to scripted and / or graded materials (Field, 2002; Flowerdew & Miller, 2005). The argument is that learners should be exposed to real-life input because scripted materials are devoid of the redundancies of informal speech. Field (2002) also stated authentic materials afford examples of "hesitations, stuttering, false starts, and long, loosely structured sentences" (p. 244) which characterize natural speech, and advised exposing students to such materials in the early stage of their learning.

Field (2002) further argued that learners need practice and strategies in dealing with texts where they have only partial understanding of what they hear; this is what they encounter in real life. Since many non-native speakers do not understand everything they hear, they need to make guesses and they should be encouraged to do so. All learners "need to be shown that making guesses is not a sign of failure" (Field, 2002, p. 247), but is vital in comprehending real-world input. The practice of extensive listening is effective in exposing learners to real-life input (Renandya & Farrell, 2010).

Definition, Aim, and Benefits of Extensive Listening

Renandya and Farrell (2010) defined extensive listening as "all types of listening activities that allow learners to receive a lot of comprehensible and enjoyable listening input" (p. 5). They

argued that listening might be best learned through listening, just as advocates of extensive reading believe “reading is best learnt through reading” (p. 3).

The aim of extensive listening is to develop “listening fluency,” which is presumed to assist learners to improve automatic processing of the target language when done properly (Waring, 2008, p. 8). Choosing listening materials appropriate for the level of learners is important. Waring (2008) stated that listening materials should be easy enough for learners so that they “understand 90% or more of the content”; otherwise, they can become frustrated and can gain very little. However, he also pointed out that sometimes the complexity of the material is compensated for by the interest and background knowledge students have.

Extensive listening practice also helps students acquire more vocabulary, recognize various accents, and improve their pronunciation and speaking (Renandya & Farrell, 2010). Moreover, extensive listening is believed to augment students’ motivation (Reinders & Cho, 2010). Field (2002) stated that students are generally not daunted or discouraged by authentic texts but feel motivated by obtaining unaltered information. Once such motivation is aroused, learners tend to pursue learning on their own and often maintain the new learning behavior regardless of the presence of teachers and others (Brown, 2002).

Motivation

In foreign language acquisition, motivation plays a pivotal role and is regarded as the universal principle that prompts learners to take independent action (Dörnyei, 2001). Learners can be motivated by intrinsic and extrinsic factors, depending on the situation and individual traits, but often these two factors are interrelated. In their study on student blog-making projects, Bhattacharya and Chauhan (2010) reported that the majority of their students were primarily motivated by internal factors and illustrated how this is related to autonomy:

Students were motivated by intrinsic factors like sense of achievement, self-motivated corrections . . . and [this fact] seems to vindicate the position taken by Dörnyei (2001) and Deci and Ryan (1985) that intrinsic motivation is a fundamental construct in the development of learner autonomy. (p. 15)

Thus, it is essential to create a learning environment that fosters a sense of achievement and self-motivation, leading students towards autonomy.

Background for the Study

Speaking and Listening (S&L) Course

Freshmen in the intensive English program have 15 hours a week of English, most of which are dedicated to reading and writing, to prepare for future lectures in English. The S&L course is designed to establish a foundation for these core classes, and aims at assisting students to actively participate in and lead discussions as well as give presentations. As most of the hours in the S&L course are used to develop students’ productive skills, it was felt they needed additional exposure to authentic speech outside the classroom.

Objectives for Assigning TED Talks as Outside Classroom Listening Practice

There were two objectives for assigning this activity:

1. To improve students’ listening skills through exposure to authentic speech.
2. To offer students enjoyable and informative lectures that would motivate them to pursue tasks on their own, hopefully beyond the course.

Procedure for a Listening and Writing Activity Using TED Talks

Prior to assigning students the TED Talks task, 3 class hours were devoted to listening practice, as outlined below:

- Present “lecture language” (phrases that indicate the overall structure of lectures)
- Teach note-taking skills
- Provide listening practice with pre-recorded lectures, followed by comprehension quizzes
- In the third class, introduce two preselected TED Talks. Give tips on choosing appropriate TED lectures, based on the length, lecturers, genres, etc. Assign the tasks of selecting lectures and keeping a listening journal.

In their Lecture Listening Journal (LLJ), students summarized lectures in 100 words and added reactions / comments in 50 to 100 words (see Appendix C). They took notes while viewing the lectures and submitted them with the journal. As an optional entry, students were asked to record how many times they had viewed a particular lecture and how long the task took. The journals were evaluated by engagement, rather than quality, so students received full marks for completion of the tasks.

Students brought their LLJs to class to share with peers in small groups. If time allowed, some instructors had students give brief reports on their LLJ in groups or to the whole class.

Students also filled in self-evaluation forms (Appendix D) to track their progress and submit at the end of the course.

Methods

Participants

The course was offered to 468 freshmen whose average age was 18; 349 were upper intermediate (average total TOEFL score: 514; listening: 52) and 119 were intermediate (average total TOEFL score: 443; listening: 45).

Data Collection

Two student surveys were administered, one at the beginning and one at the end of the term:

Survey 1. The first survey was given to obtain background information on students’ habits for improving their listening skills, and their perceptions of their listening abilities. This survey was used as a reference and was not thoroughly analyzed for this paper.

Survey 2. The second survey (Appendix A) was given to all students to gauge their perceptions of the efficacy of the course, including the speaking portion. The survey consisted of three parts: the course in general, the speaking portion, and the listening portion. In the listening part, three closed questions and one open-ended question were asked. Out of 468 students, 303 responded. For this study, qualitative responses from the listening part of the survey were inductively read through and coded, isolating themes of interest. Data was separated according to upper intermediate and intermediate proficiency levels. The listening journals were also analyzed to confirm these themes.

Findings

The coding and analysis of the results of the second survey and students' listening journals generated the following salient themes: 1) listening comprehension skills, 2) motivation, and 3) authentic listening material.

Each of these themes is separately reported for the upper intermediate and intermediate levels with tables and qualitative data based on students' survey responses and journals. Students' unedited comments are also provided.

Listening Comprehension Skills

Upper-intermediate. As Table B1 (Appendix B) indicates, 78% of the upper-intermediate level students perceived that the S&L course helped them improve their listening skills; 82% agreed that the LLJ activity improved their lecture listening skills. One student stated, "Lecture Listening Journal is very meaningful because it makes us listen carefully to the lecture and that improve our listening skills." Another student said, "At first it was very difficult for me to understand English lectures. However, as I took more S&L lessons and listened more TED talks, I came to understand them much better."

Intermediate. Table B2 (Appendix B) indicates that the majority of intermediate students (74%) also perceived that the course helped them improve their listening skills; 76% said that the LLJ activity improved their lecture listening skills. One student said, "Using TED is the best way for me to learn how to speak English. It is so exciting and gave me various thinkings."

Motivation

Upper-intermediate. Table B1 (Appendix B) shows 85% of upper-intermediate students wanted to continue watching online lectures in the future. One student stated that the process of selecting and viewing lectures helped him to choose his major. He wrote, "TED.com gave me many topics that attracted me greatly. This site helped me pick up some majors that I will specialize in."

Many students expressed intentions of incorporating the task into their daily lives. One student commented, "I was impressed by listening to the lecture. I want to continue to watch online lectures like TED everyday during summer vacation."

Intermediate. Table B2 (Appendix B) indicates 77% of the intermediate students also intended to visit TED.com after the course. One student said, "TED was a big discovery for me. I think it is very useful. I want to continue to use it." Another commented, "At first, I was very hard. I did not understand what speaker says. However, I became to be able to understand spoken English a little. Now, I want to listen to English more."

Analysis of students' journals also revealed that some students were deeply affected by the content of the lectures, which inspired them to pursue topics introduced in the lectures. A student who had watched *Nadia Al-Sakkaf: See Yemen Through My Eyes* (Al-Sakkaf, 2011) stated she felt that the speaker's country was truly on the move for change and that the existence of women like Nadia would encourage many people. She intended to check the *Yemen Times* website (<http://yementimes.com>) and learn more about the country from alternative media. Another student stated that she was stimulated by a speech about school lunches by Ann Cooper. This student researched and presented on food education later in the course.

This last point seems to support the view of Dörnyei (2001) and Deci and Ryan (1985) that once motivated, students act independently.

Authentic Listening Material

Upper-intermediate. A number of students recounted that the TED lectures were realistic representations of speeches and applauded the value of being exposed to such listening materials. One student commented, “TED was very good way to train listening skills . . . I learned how to catch up with fast speed speaking.” Another student welcomed the variety of English accents being spoken.

Intermediate. Intermediate students also agreed that TED lectures offered authentic English. One student stated, “I like it very much because most teachers speak English easily to us, however, we can listen more natural English in TED.”

Discussion: Helping Low-Proficiency Students Cope Better

As has been illustrated, the results of the survey and student journals entries indicate that the majority of the students at both levels regarded the activity favorably. However, a more careful analysis of the data points to some issues to be addressed.

Speed of Speech

Speaking speed needs to be assessed when choosing lectures, especially for lower-proficiency students: fast speakers were a big stumbling block for many of them. Although many upper-intermediate students appreciated the challenge of the task, some with weaker listening skills were frustrated or discouraged to the point of giving up. One intermediate student recounted, “I hesitated to do LLJ at first because I couldn’t catch up with the native speaker’s speeds and couldn’t understand what lecturer said. It took me a long time to take notes and write summary and reactions.”

Some students seemed to reach a certain point where a faster speech rate first causes lower comprehension, and soon almost no comprehension (Renandya & Farrell, 2010). At this stage, the task becomes ineffective and can be counterproductive. The instructors for this course misjudged the varying degrees of students’ proficiency in listening comprehension and also applied the same approach to different levels of students.

Selecting the Lectures

Some students indicated in the survey that time constraints they had from working on other assignments given in the intensive program and failure to choose lectures appropriate for their levels deprived them of the benefits of the tasks. To address this, a list of level-specific lectures could be prepared and initially offered rather than having students choose lectures themselves. Although such lists as “Top 10 TED Talks” (Deubelbeiss, 2008) are available, these lists do not indicate the degrees of difficulty of the lectures. Thus, a list that accounts for speed, accent, and vocabulary complexity should be prepared.

Need for Scaffolding Activities

The survey also revealed that after the LLJ activity is assigned, scaffolding activities in class are a requisite to address the issues students encounter. Field (2002) stated the most important aspect of a listening class is that of “diagnosing” where the communication breaks down and tackling the problem (p. 246). Students’ awareness of and practice on this type of problem need to be heightened. One of the activities Field (2002) suggested is a dictation exercise where students

write a number of dictated sentences “containing examples of the weak forms such as /wəz/ for ‘was’, /tə/ for ‘to’, /ʊ/ for ‘who’ so that they can interpret them correctly the next time they hear them” (p. 246). Without such scaffolding activities, merely exposing students to substantial amounts of extensive listening will yield little, if any, positive benefit. Student progress should be regularly monitored by paying more attention to verbal cues and journal entries to identify problem areas. As many mini-lessons as time allows should be given to address such problems.

Pre-Listening Tasks

The degree of anticipation should be maximized. As Lingzhu (2003) pointed out, expectation plays a key role in listening comprehension. Thus, pre-listening activities should precede listening tasks to prepare students for what they will hear. Such activities should be clearly demonstrated and rehearsed in class so that students can conduct them on their own before they view lectures outside the class. A list of questions such as the following can be used prior to the listening:

- What do you know about the topic?
- What does the title indicate? What can you infer from it?
- Who is the speaker? Do a quick search on the speaker. What is his / her field and what is he / she noted for?
- What do you think the speaker is going to say?
- What words can you guess the speaker is going to use? Jot down the words in English as well as in Japanese, look up the English equivalent if you have written the words in Japanese, and check the pronunciation.

Lingzhu (2003) also stressed the importance of giving students contextual knowledge in pre-listening activities to ensure successful comprehension. While pre-listening activities are common practice, teachers should ensure that students integrate this into their own pre-listening habits.

Post-Listening Tasks

Post-listening tasks should be modified to make them more manageable for lower level students. Although upper-intermediate students appreciated the task of summarizing the lectures, claiming it helped improve their summarizing skills, many lower-level students stated it was very difficult and took substantial amounts of time, as just understanding the speakers was a challenge. For them, less demanding writing tasks, such as listing what they grasped and discussing their reactions with others, might suffice and be more motivating.

Focus on General Meaning

Students should be repeatedly reminded that they are not expected to understand the lectures perfectly and that the focus is on general meaning, not details. This could prevent unnecessary frustration.

Transcripts and Subtitles

The final point concerns the transcripts and subtitles accompanying the lectures. They can improve students’ listening skills or deter them from developing. Some students believed they understood the listening materials when they were merely reading the subtitles. As Waring (2008) pointed out, students may only “be understanding what the subtitle says, not the original spoken English” (p. 8). Some students who confessed that they heavily relied on the transcripts or subtitles to write summaries confirmed this statement. One student said, “I think LLJ is a good assignment for English-learning beginner. However I sometimes rely on Japanese

transcript. It doesn't help my improving." Such students were often tempted to copy phrases from transcripts rather than try to summarize the lecture, thus plagiarizing.

To address this concern, assigning the following procedure might be useful.

1. Watch the lecture without transcripts or subtitles to understand the general meaning.
2. Watch it again and take notes; note difficult points.
3. Read the transcript, not the subtitles, to understand the whole lecture and underline new words missed in previous viewings.
4. Look up the meanings and pronunciation of these words and practice pronouncing them to make them more recognizable.
5. Listen to the lecture again without the transcript. With the meaning and the pronunciation of the new words behind you, you may be able to follow the lecture more easily.

Students should be encouraged to refrain from reading the subtitles until the end to confirm their comprehension.

Conclusion

This article illustrates some benefits that can be gained from using online lectures such as TED Talks for students at lower and upper levels of proficiency. In addition to most students acknowledging that the activity enhanced their listening comprehension, it is noteworthy that the TED lectures motivated some students to independently pursue their own interests and spurred some to further research. The authentic listening materials also helped them become used to real aural input. The paper also describes some of the scaffolding needed to optimize potential student benefits. Future studies could compile quantitative data to accurately gauge how the activity affects listening comprehension. Finally, one must bear in mind Field's (2002) comment concerning listening: "We focus on the product of listening when we should be interested in the process—what is going on in the heads of our learners" (p. 246). More research is necessary on identifying difficulties students encounter, particularly at lower proficiency levels and effective strategies to help students overcome them and become better listeners.

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Appendix A
Post-Course Survey Questions

- I. On S&L course in general
 - 1. S&L helped me improve my academic speaking and listening skills.
 - 2. I enjoyed my S&L class.
 - 3. How was the level of difficulty of this class for you?
 - 4. How was the amount of homework for you?
 - 5. Please feel free to write comments about your general impressions of the class.

- II. On Speaking Skills / Tasks
 - 6. S&L helped me improve my discussion skills (leading / participating).
 - 7. S&L helped me improve my ability to make a short presentation of an opinion.
 - 8. The "Speaking Phrase Tests" and online audio were useful for my study of phrases.
 - 9. The "Final P&D" and Video Self-Analysis were effective for setting goals for improvement.
 - 10. Please write any comments or suggestions about speaking skills and activities / homework.

- III. On Listening Skills / Tasks
 - 11. Compared with the beginning of the term, my lecture listening skills improved through S&L.
 - 12. The Lecture Listening Journal (LLJ) was a good way to improve my lecture listening skills.
 - 13. I want to continue to watch online lectures like TED in the future for English practice, even if it is not required.
 - 14. Please write any comments or suggestions about listening and activities / homework.

Appendix B
Post-Course Survey
III. Listening Skills Results

Table B1***Upper-Intermediate Students***

Questions	Responses	<i>n</i>	Percent
1. Compared with the beginning of the term, my lecture listening skills improved through the S&L course.	Strongly agree	60	30
	Agree	104	48
	Disagree	42	19
	Strongly disagree	7	3
2. The Lecture Listening Journal (LLJ) was a good way to improve my lecture listening skills.	Strongly agree	69	32
	Agree	107	50
	Disagree	25	12
	Strongly disagree	12	6
3. I want to continue to watch online lectures like TED in the future for English practice even if it is not required.	Strongly agree	107	50
	Agree	76	35
	Disagree	21	10
	Strongly disagree	11	5

Note. *N* = 213 for Questions 1 and 2; *N* = 215 for Question 3.

Table B2***Intermediate Students***

Questions	Responses	<i>n</i>	Percent
1. Compared with the beginning of the term, my lecture listening skills improved through the S&L course.	Strongly agree	22	25
	Agree	43	49
	Disagree	15	17
	Strongly disagree	8	9
2. The Lecture Listening Journal (LLJ) was a good way to improve my lecture listening skills.	Strongly agree	28	32
	Agree	38	44
	Disagree	10	11
	Strongly disagree	11	13
3. I want to continue to watch online lectures like TED in the future for English practice even if it is not required.	Strongly agree	46	53
	Agree	21	24
	Disagree	11	13
	Strongly disagree	9	10

Note. *N* = 88 for Question 1; *N* = 87 for Questions 2 and 3.

Appendix C
Lecture Listening Journal Form

ELA Speaking & Listening: Lecture Listening Journal #_____

ID: _____ Your Name: _____

Date(s): _____ Source: _____

Name of Lecturer: _____

Title of Lecture: _____ Length: _____ minutes

Summary (100 words or more): Summarize the main points in YOUR OWN words. Begin by mentioning the title, lecturer, source, and date.

Reaction (50 words or more): Write your opinion about a main point in the lecture.

Reflection: How was this LLJ? How many minutes did you take to listen? How about writing the summary? Write some short comments for your instructor and add any questions or suggestions you have.

Note 1: You can type your LLJ and print if you like, or write by hand neatly on this paper. In some cases, your instructor might ask you to upload it on a class blog.

Note 2: You will need to attach your lecture notes to your LLJ. Any kinds of notes are fine, but try to take notes well. The notes will not be evaluated for quality. They are for the instructor's reference to see how you took notes on that lecture.

Appendix D

Lecture Listening Journal (LLJ) Self-Evaluation Form

Full Name _____ Section _____

Your Lecture Listening Journal (LLJ) is a chance to practice listening to academic lectures. Any English academic lecture 10 minutes or longer can be used. TED.com and academicearth.org have many interesting lectures, or you can use LLA. In total, you must create and submit a journal entry and lecture notes for at least 6 lectures. Your instructor may give you more specific directions about deadlines, good topics or how to submit your journal.

Each LLJ entry is worth 2 pts, and should include:

1. Summary (1 pt): 100 words or more on the main points in YOUR OWN words. Begin by mentioning the title, lecturer, source, and date: Example = In his / her lecture titled "Title Words" on [Date / Year], [Dr. / Professor Name] mainly describes how... / argues that...
2. Reaction (0.5 pts): 50 words or more of your opinion about a main point in the lecture
3. Lecture notes (0.5 pts). Rough is fine, but try to take good notes as you listen, and make sure you use loose leaf so that you can submit them to your instructor.
4. (Optionally) A few words of comments for your own record such as whether it was difficult, how many times you listened, whether you used subtitles, etc. Short is OK.

LLJ	Title / Speaker / Source	Deadline (Late = - 0.5)	Met Criteria? Check
No. 1	e.g., K. Robinson says schools kill creativity / Ken Robinson / TED		Summary 100+ <input type="checkbox"/> Reaction 50+ <input type="checkbox"/> L. Notes <input type="checkbox"/> / 2pts
No. 2			Summary 100+ <input type="checkbox"/> Reaction 50+ <input type="checkbox"/> L. Notes <input type="checkbox"/> / 2pts
No. 3			Summary 100+ <input type="checkbox"/> Reaction 50+ <input type="checkbox"/> L. Notes <input type="checkbox"/> / 2pts
No. 4			Summary 100+ <input type="checkbox"/> Reaction 50+ <input type="checkbox"/> L. Notes <input type="checkbox"/> / 2pts
No. 5			Summary 100+ <input type="checkbox"/> Reaction 50+ <input type="checkbox"/> L. Notes <input type="checkbox"/> / 2pts
No. 6			Summary 100+ <input type="checkbox"/> Reaction 50+ <input type="checkbox"/> L. Notes <input type="checkbox"/> / 2pts

Final Self-Scoring _____ / 12pts

Comment:

This evaluation form was created by Mark Christianson, formerly with ICU.