

TED Talks for Authentic Learning: An Academic Oral Communication Course for Improving Presentation Skills for EFL University Students

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Abstract—The focus of this research project is to identify methods in which EFL university students can improve reading, listening, academic discussion and presentation skills. In order to improve students' English language ability and the various skills, a 15-week thematic course was designed to improve the academic presentation abilities of Japanese university students. This course was divided into two parts; the first part provided students with instruction on how to plan and implement an academic presentation; the second part focused on using TED Talk videos and transcripts that focused on conceptual issues to stimulate classroom discussions. Furthermore, the two parts were organized into six units. The first two units provided the foundation and necessary skills needed to create an effective PowerPoint presentation. Within the first three weeks of the course, students were required to create two individual PowerPoint presentations, one on their favorite hobby and another presentation on a societal problem. The remaining four units were based on authentic TED Talk videos and transcripts. TED Talk materials covered topics including educational philosophy, environmental issues, motivation in everyday life and wonders of the natural world. For each TED Talk presentation, comprehension questions were created to evaluate students' understanding of the material while improving their overall knowledge on academic topics. The exposure to the academic content covered in the TED Talks was used to facilitate classroom discussions. *Once* students were able to comprehend the material, they were put into small groups. Groups consisted of three to four students. Each group would then create a group PowerPoint presentation based on the content covered in the TED Talk lesson. The rationale behind the curriculum for this course was to move students from planning and implementing a PowerPoint presentation on elementary topics to instructing them on methods for executing group presentations on more complicated academic topics. Survey items focused on students' perceptions of the material, usefulness of the contents taught and overall satisfaction with the 15-week elective course. Data for this study were collected from October 2015-January 2016. The course was conducted over a 15-week period; one week consisted of a 90-minute lesson. This course had 25 students. All students registered in this voluntarily, as it was an elective course offered by a large Japanese National University.

Keywords—Communication, Presentation Skills, TED Talks

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I. INTRODUCTION

TED Talks as an Educational Tool

TED (Technology, Entertainment and Design) Talks has been providing intellectually stimulating presentations since 1984. TED presentations are delivered by non-native and native speakers of English; downloadable transcripts are available in over 40 languages via the TED website. Educators have been utilizing these valuable learning materials since they were initially put online in 2007 [1].

Presentations from TED Talks were used as supplementary materials to teach oral communication and presentations skills at a National University in Japan. TED Talks were used to develop students' listening skills in English, and to provide a contextual base for students' presentations. The authenticity and thought-provoking nature of TED Talks provided students with challenging theme that were essential in making this elective course a success. In addition, before students were introduced to TED Talks, they were given 4-weeks of presentation skills instruction where they were required to complete two individual presentations. The skills learned in these 4-weeks were used to build a foundation to deliver more effective presentations based on the themes of the chosen TED Talks. The following 10 weeks of the semester consisted of viewing and studying pre-selected TED Talks. Students viewed the TED Talks at least two times; they were also assigned the task of completing comprehension questions based on the TED Talk presentation. Once students were able to successfully complete the comprehension questions, they were assigned to create a group PowerPoint presentation related to themes of the TED Talks.

In order to measure the perceived success of this course, the following research questions were developed:

1. Why students decided to take this elective oral communication and presentation course?
2. Did students find the TED Talks interesting?
3. Did students learn any presentation skills?

II. "REAL LIFE" ENGLISH

The traditional method of teaching listening has mainly consisted of scripted and graded materials. These materials are acceptable for some learners; but the nature of these typical textbook activities fails to motivate most students.

This has resulted in an increased use of authentic materials [2]. The authentic nature of TED presentations grant students the opportunity to be exposed to speeches and presentations that are actually intended for real-life input. Research by Field in 2002 found that materials used that were authentic, supplied students with “hesitations, stuttering, false starts, and long, loosely structured sentences” (p.244)[2]. Field also noted that authentic materials directly reflect what students will experience in real life where many non-native speakers are unable to understand English in its entirety, and thus “need to be shown that making guesses is not a sign of failure” [2]. This is how non-native speakers of English are able to cope with daily situations where complete and thorough comprehension is not always an option.

III. EXTENSIVE LISTENING AND MOTIVATION

The use of authentic TED Talks furnishes students with extensive listening practice. Extensive listening as defined by Renandya and Farrell is “all types of listening activities that allow learners to receive a lot of comprehensible and enjoyable input” (p.5) [3]. The incredible variety of themes and topics offered on the TED website allows instructors to choose presentations that are suitable, enjoyable and representative of students’ majors. Teachers must spend a considerable amount of time searching for relevant presentations in terms of content and language level. Waring (2008) indicated that listening materials should be at a level where students are able to understand 90% or more of the content; if not, students’ frustration can result in a failed or wasted lesson or class [4]. On occasion the complexity, as stated by Waring (2008), can overcome frustrations if the material is of interest or matches students’ background knowledge or area of specialty [4].

The extensive listening experienced through TED also enhances students’ motivation [5]. The authenticity together with exhilarating presentations offered through TED Talks allows students to maintain enough motivation so that autonomous learning occurs in the absence of a structured curriculum or course. This self-learning environment is a key component of the internal factors of motivation and autonomous learning as Bhattacharya and Chauhan (2010) explained [6]:

Students were motivated by intrinsic factors like sense of achievement, self-motivated corrections...and 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).

IV. BACKGROUND

Students enrolled in this Oral Communication and Presentation skills (OCP) course consisted of second-year, third-year and fourth-year undergraduate students at a large, prestigious Japanese National University. None of the students enrolled in this elective class were English Language majors, as this university does not offer degrees in English or other foreign languages. Students represented in this class were engineering, chemistry, mathematics and agriculture majors. Lastly, all students in this class have taken at least

two academic speaking classes where they were required to complete a three-minute presentation. Topics for this requirement varied from instructor to instructor.

Course Objectives

The objectives of the course were divided into two sections:

1. To review and build upon previous presentation skills learned during students’ freshman year. The first four weeks, as previously stated, required students to complete two individual presentations: the first presentation required students to complete a three-minute presentation on a hobby or interest, and, the second presentation required students to complete a four-minute presentation on a problem in Japanese society. Students had to explain the problem, the significance of the problem, and a solution to the problem.
2. To introduce TED presentations to study content. Once the selected content was clearly understood by all students, they were divided into groups and were instructed to create a group presentation on a topic related to the general theme from the particular TED Talk.

Procedural Guidelines for using TED Talks

The following is the process used prior to and after the viewing the TED Talk:

1. Class discussion about the general theme or topic from the selected TED Talk. Discussions took the most part of one full 90-minute class. At the end of the discussion, students were given comprehension questions simply to read for homework. These 15 questions usually followed the order of the selected TED Talk. Students were given the handout so they could take the appropriate amount of time to familiarize themselves with any unknown vocabulary or phrases found in the handout.
2. In the following week, students viewed the TED Talk with Japanese subtitles. Prior to viewing, students were put into groups of three to four members per group. These groups would also be the same groups that students would work in to eventually create and conduct their PowerPoint presentation on the topic related to the TED Talk. After the completion of the TED Talk, groups worked together in an attempt to answer all the comprehension questions from the handout.
3. In the following week, students viewed the same TED Talk as reinforcement. After the completion of the TED Talk, a class discussion would take place that included covering the answers to the comprehension questions. Once this was completed, students were then instructed to decide on a suitable topic for their group presentation that would follow in the ensuing weeks.

V. METHODS

This class met once per week for ninety minutes over a 15-week semester from October, 2015-January, 2016 and consisted of 25 participants (20 male; 15 female), the maximum enrollment allowed by the university. Furthermore, there were 7 second-year students; 10 third-year students and 8 fourth-year students.

Data Collection

Two student surveys were conducted. The first students' survey was administered in the seventh week, and the second administered in the fifteenth and final week of the course.

Survey 1. This survey (Appendix A) was administered to understand the reasons why students decided to take the class; to obtain information if students had read the online course description and syllabus; to measure students' perceptions of the course materials; and to measure if students felt the material was level appropriate.

Survey 2. This survey (Appendix B) measured students' perceptions on the effectiveness of course expectations; the degree of difficulty of course materials; perceptions of the TED Talks; perceptions of participating in group presentations and if students felt their presentation skills had improved.

VI. RESULTS

The results of the first survey given after the seventh class indicated the following premises: 1) students' reasons for selecting the OCP elective course, 2) overall difficulty of the course materials used in the first seven weeks of instruction, and 3) students' reactions toward the perceived improvement of their presentation skills.

The results in Table 1 clearly show that the majority of students chose to take this course in order to improve their *speaking* and *presentation* abilities. Furthermore, course materials for the majority of participants (76%) were at a level that was *A little difficult*. Using materials that are slightly too difficult will maintain and enhance student motivation without causing unnecessary frustration [4]. These results are directly correlated to students' perceived improvement of presentation skills where the majority of students reported a *better* or *a little better* improvement of presentation skills.

TABLE I: RESULTS FROM SURVEY 1 (N = 25)

	Number of Students (%)
<i>Reasons for choosing course</i>	
Improve speaking ability	15 (60%)
Improve listening skills	2 (8%)
Improve presentation skills	8 (32%)
Improve reading skills	0 (0%)
<i>Difficulty of presentation study units</i>	
Too difficult	4 (16%)
A little difficult	19 (76%)
About right	2 (8%)
A little easy	0 (0%)
Easy	0 (0%)
Too Easy	0 (0%)
<i>Perceived improvement of presentation skills</i>	
Much better	3 (12%)
Better	10 (40%)
A little better	8 (32%)
No change	4 (16%)

TABLE II: SURVEY 2 (GIVEN AFTER FINAL CLASS) (N = 25)

	Number of Students (%)
<i>Expectations of course met</i>	
Very much	15 (60%)
Mostly	4 (16%)
Fairly	6 (24%)
Not so much	0 (0%)
Not at all	0 (0%)
<i>Opinions toward TED Talks</i>	
Very interesting	21 (84%)
Interesting	3 (12%)
OK	1 (4%)
Not so interesting	0 (0%)
Boring	0 (0%)
<i>Perceived improvement of presentation skills</i>	
Much better	6 (24%)
Better	15 (60%)
A little better	3 (12%)
No change	1 (4%)

The results from the second survey generated the following themes: 1) overall success of the course, 2) Students' feelings toward the selected TED Talks, and 3) student reactions toward the perceived improvement of their presentation skills after completing the 15-weeks course. The majority of students (76%) believed that course expectations were met. In addition, designated TED presentations used for this class were of interest to the overwhelming majority of the class. The success in selecting appropriate TED Talk presentations fits into Reinders & Cho's (2010) theory that enhanced student motivation is spurred by the attractive and interesting nature of the chosen TED Talk [5]. Further research needs to be conducted to measure if this enhanced motivation leads to more autonomous learning. Finally, the majority of participants (84%) judged that their presentation skills had improved. Compared to the results in Table 1., where slightly more than half (52%) felt their presentation skills had improved, this increased percentage of students who perceived their presentation skills having improved can be attributed to the use of TED Talks in the final 8-weeks of class.

VII. CONCLUSION

This article highlighted important advantages gained through the use of online presentations found on the TED website. Instructors need to carefully consider which TED presentations to utilize in order to maintain and enhance student motivation. The authentic nature of TED allows students to receive real-life input while cultivating further interest in the specified field or topic that can eventually lead to more autonomous learning. In addition, choosing TED content that is slightly beyond the level of students is critical to the success of this course because it sustains student interest and avoids unnecessary disturbances caused by using material that is excessively difficult or complex. Further research must be conducted to determine the effectiveness TED has in promoting autonomous learning among undergraduate university students.

APPENDICES

Appendix A

Survey Questions for Academic Oral Communication

1. Why did you choose this class?
a) to improve your speaking ability b) to improve your presentation skills
c) to improve your listening skills d) to improve your reading skills
2. Did you think this course would be difficult?
a) yes b) no
3. Did you read the syllabus before registration?
a) yes b) no
4. How do you feel about the presentation study units?
a) Too difficult b) a little difficult c) about right d) a little easy
e) easy f) too easy
5. How do you feel about your presentation skills after finishing Units 1 & 2
a) Much better b) better c) a little better d) no change
6. Do you think Units 1 & 2 are valuable for this course?
a) yes b) no

Please write any comment you have.

Appendix B

Survey Questions for Academic Oral Communication Final

- Did this course meet your expectations?
a) Yes, very much b) Mostly c) Fairly d) not so much e) not at all
- What did you think about the TED talks?
a) Very interesting b) interesting c) OK d) not so interesting e) boring
- How do you feel about your presentation skills after finishing this course?
a) Much better b) better c) a little better d) no change
- Other comments:

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