

# ENCOURAGING ENGLISH LANGUAGE PRODUCTION USING TED TALKS AT THE TERTIARY LEVEL: A STUDY IN A TECHNICAL COLLEGE

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## **Abstract**

This paper investigates using TED Talks to promote English language learning and production to ESL (English as a second language) learners at the tertiary level with the proficiency level between A2 and C1 as determined by their college entry-level test. In this study, it is used with a mixed-ability group of students of an engineering college who have difficulty performing in the language during classroom participation, while comprehending subject lectures or while communicating with their teachers and peers. In order to make their learning more engaging and to enhance the learner experience of the English language in this engineering class, TED Talks were used. Pre- and post-viewing activities were given to a group of students and were continuously assessed using classroom observation and production of language in classroom activities. The findings show that using TED Talks as a resource in the classroom improved English language production in terms of speaking and encouraged learners to confidently use the language.

**Keywords:** Teaching English; using technology; TED Talks; tertiary level; speaking

## **1. Introduction**

The use of videos as a teaching-learning tool for English language learning is not a new phenomenon (Salaberry, 2001; Stempleski, 1992). The impact of videos in a classroom is two-fold as it involves both auditory narrative and visual presence. This paper investigates the strategy of using TED Talk videos for teaching-learning, especially for active production of English language in a technical college in India.

This study uses the framework of language immersion (Genesee, 1985; Johnson and Swain, 1997; Johnstone, 2002) as a pedagogical approach to examine whether using TED Talks and accompanying classroom activities can lead to enhanced English language production. It aims to recognise the value of using TED Talks as a strategy for constantly immersing the ESL learners in L2, thereby improving language production. Language production can be in terms of

either writing or speaking. The study focuses primarily on the development of speaking skills as it is arguably the most neglected language skill (Baker & Westrup, 2003), particularly in a tertiary level classroom context. In particular, it strives to investigate the impact of watching TED Talks on student motivation for language production as well as to explore how creating an immersive learning environment can encourage speaking.

## **2. Literature review**

The use of videos for English language teaching and learning has been widely acknowledged by ELT practitioners (Goldstein & Driver, 2015). Videos as a tool for teaching-learning gives learners a double benefit by providing authentic use of the language as well as by placing it in the appropriate cultural context (Bello, 1999; Stempleski, 1992).

Another important feature is that videos can be paused and repeated at any time during viewing. While watching the videos, the learners are able to see facial expressions and body language at the same time as they notice the stress, intonation, and rhythm of the language (Bello, 1999). In an almost fun and informal way, the students learn to use the language.

Learning a language through immersion was originally promoted within bilingual education (Johnson and Swain, 1997). Second language learning through immersion programs were first developed in Canada in the 1960s (Genesee, 1985) and later on in the United States in the 1970s (Campbell, 1984). Students who learn a second language through the immersion method develop native-like fluency and confidence to use the language (Genesee, 2004).

The most important teaching objective in this listening exercise is that students are constantly exposed to the English language, including its accent, intonation, pronunciation, and grammar. It is believed that the more one is exposed to the target language, the easier it becomes to master it (Krashen, 1985).

There are several studies that have proved the effectiveness of videos in second-language learning, particularly in English language learning (Hafner, 2014; Liu, 2005; Chapple & Curtis, 2000; Salaberry, 2001; Plass, Chun, Mayer, & Leutner, 1998). However, the use of TED Talks as a video resource for encouraging English language learning and production is fairly limited barring studies like the use of TED talks for listening by Ring (2016). Ring, in his study, investigates and proves the effectiveness of a 25-lesson TED talk program to promote listening skills in English language teaching. Using TED talks as a listening strategy, Ring provides a systematic pedagogic framework for educators to teach effective listening. Results showed students become more autonomous, self-efficacious and collaborative learners. TED

talks also proved to be an effective academic listening resource. Hence, the present study aims to create an immersive language environment for teaching-learning English using TED Talks.

Watching TED Talks draws students' attention to the English language. The class can choose to view the type of videos. The way language is produced in the videos, generates interest in class for discussion and an eventual presentation. It builds a connection with other students and the instructor. Since TED Talks deal with general topics, such a form of learning energizes or relaxes students for the learning exercise. It promotes affability, and decreases anxiety and tension, thus providing a conducive atmosphere for English language production.

TED Talks have several advantages as a learning tool. Using them as an instructional tool was chosen because the current set of teenagers belongs to the 'Internet' generation. They are constantly surfing various sites, watching videos, playing virtual games and are also very active on social media. The Internet unifies linguistic, cultural, social and economic differences. Several TED Talk videos are available online and range from 3 to 18 minutes. Hence, using TED Talks is considered appropriate in a classroom context.

TED Talks generally deal with one's life experiences and anecdotes. It also is, in a way, personal storytelling, people talking about their own start-ups, inventions and life experiences. They are delivered in a contemporary, non-traditional manner and the speaker does not conform to a formal way of lecturing. Although these talks appear unstructured, they follow a framework within which they operate. Presenters are well-coached and instructed to follow a specific presentation formula, which maximizes storyboarding and highlights a passion for the subject. The official TED site records that it has more than 2,700 talks to view based on duration, topics and language preference. According to the data available on the TED homepage, some presentations have received 16 million hits which underscore the popularity of this platform.

TED speakers may or may not be native speakers of the language and this diversity of linguistic backgrounds to a certain extent puts the student listeners in a comfort zone. These videos also have a subtitle option, which helps limited English proficiency (LEP) learners to read and understand what is being spoken. Watching these TED Talks allows for language immersion, promoting learning inside and outside the classroom as online videos can be accessed anytime. If Wi-Fi accessibility is provided in the classroom, students have the option of viewing them even outside of classroom hours, in their hostel, common areas, etc.

### **3. The current study**

#### **3.1. Aim and background**

English is the accepted global language and particularly in a country like India, much importance is given to English language teaching and learning. Instructors use various ways of inculcating a love for the language and fostering learners' motivation to master it. Many methods and activities have been used over the years and have been found useful. Although teaching practitioners over time have emphasized learning the language using memorization of grammar rules and syntactic structures, and later on the use of language in real life-like situations, the focus has moved to creating interesting and motivating situations for the students to use language. Going with the flow of the current 'Internet' generation, one of the methods that this teacher/researcher has found effective for creating this motivation in her classroom is the use of TED Talks for English language learning and production.

This study investigates a class of 69 engineering students who took up a course titled 'Communication and Soft Skills' in their third year of the B.Tech programme. The syllabus includes developing listening and speaking skills, gives importance to conversation skills, group discussion and interview skills, giving presentations, and listening.

The linguistic knowledge of the speaker is not the sole indicator of mastery over the language rather, this mastery lies in the ability to communicate with target language speakers (Norton and Toohey, 2001). Learning the grammatical structures of a language is as important as being able to communicate adequately and use the language appropriately. Although the objective of this study was not to make the students fully proficient in the target language, it aimed to make the students improve their communicative competence using total language immersion strategy and thereby language exposure via TED Talks. The learners are totally immersed in the second language (L2), in this context English, which is used for all classroom communication, and listening and speaking activities involving TED Talks.

The L2 proficiency of the observed group ranges from CEFR A2 to C1 as determined by the entry-level test that is mandatory for all students who are admitted into the college. This group comprised students from rural schools (where the medium of instruction is predominantly the regional language), lateral entry students (those who have completed their diploma in the chosen subject, and are still coming to grips with the use of English language), vocational students (who drop a subject like physics in their 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade to take up a vocational course like welding etc., and are similar in level of English language-use abilities with the lateral entry students), students from city government-aided schools (where students

do not get many opportunities for English language production) and also students from urban areas (who are mostly from city English medium schools, and freely use English even outside the classroom). The diverse backgrounds of the students in this group lead to a similar diversity in their English language abilities.

Difficulty in understanding and producing the language can be seen at different levels for individual students. For most of these students, English is like a foreign language. Problems with understanding and speaking in the English language can be seen during classroom participation, while comprehending subject lectures, communicating with their teachers and peers and also during day-to-day conversations.

In addition to this, the problem of mother tongue influence is clearly visible in the group. Even those who are comfortable speaking the language are not willing to participate in language production activities for fear of rejection by their teachers and peers, resulting in a lack of self-confidence and the anxiety of being judged by others.

Furthermore, speaking as an activity is seldom practised in classrooms. This may be due to the teacher's felt need for maintaining classroom decorum, avoiding disturbance to neighbouring classes, etc. Also, there is hardly any opportunity to test speaking skills in the tertiary level curriculum. Hence, it is crucial for the teacher to create a congenial atmosphere for English language learning and production. Integrating videos into English language teaching and learning, particularly, TED Talks is one such activity which encourages language production across this student group.

### **3.2. Methodology**

Listening to TED talks as an activity was administered to the third-year class. The duration of each class was three periods totalling to two and a half hours a week. Although there were other learning modules to be completed, the teacher made it mandatory to watch at least one TED Talk video in each class. In addition, the class could also independently watch these videos outside class hours and document it in their 'class-work book'.

In keeping with the University semester time-frame and the prescribed syllabus, the teacher facilitated several activities and discussions in the classroom as pre-viewing and post-viewing exercises. Selecting appropriate videos for viewing is crucial for the group. Several guidelines were used for selecting the videos: the level of difficulty in understanding the talk, the vocabulary used, the average number of words per minute, the accent of the speaker, the cultural context, etc. Examples of the videos the class watched over the four-month semester are: 'Try Something New for 30 Days' by Matt Cutts, 'Turning adversity into opportunity' by

Muniba Mazari, 'The danger of a single story' by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, 'Inside the mind of a master procrastinator' by Tim Urban etc.

### **3.2.1. Pre-viewing activities**

It is important to orient the students on what they are about to watch. Before watching the video, the objective should be clearly described so that viewing is purposeful. One pre-viewing exercise could be trying to understand the difficult vocabulary or providing some background knowledge about the TED Talks they are about to watch. For example, before watching Muniba Mazari's talk, the teacher went through such vocabulary items as 'warrior', 'devastated', 'scrubs', 'whining', 'cribbing', 'adversity', 'exploring', etc. in the classroom with a discussion of each word in context.

Also, while watching the Matt Cutts video, the group was instructed to listen to certain expressions in the talk. Attention was drawn to the manner in which the speaker would greet the audience, introduce his topic, use idiomatic language like 'stuck in a rut', 'following in the footsteps', etc. For some videos, students were asked to read the transcript before watching them, so that while watching it would be comprehensible to the students. The manner in which the speech ended was also a point of focus.

### **3.2.2. Post-viewing activities**

The following are some of the post-viewing activities that were carried out in order to test the impact of watching TED Talks as motivation to English language production:

1. **Extempore Speech:** Immediately after watching the talk, each student was asked to summarise the talk and make a brief presentation. Students were also divided into pairs and asked to give their opinion on particular topics after discussing them with their partners. Topics for discussion ranged from topics of global relevance to personal ones like eating a healthy diet and cutting down on junk food after watching the TED video 'Try Something New for 30 Days' by Matt Cutts. As a follow-up activity for this video, the students were given the task of looking up Morgan Spurlock's 30-day experiment with McDonald's food.
2. **Group Work:** Students were divided into groups of 10 and were asked to pick a topic. The topic was a general one of which students would commonly be aware. After 15 minutes of discussion within each group, one member from the group would come to the front and present a brief report.

3. Role Play: Students are divided into groups of four. Each group picks a situation ranging from informal conversations with family, friends or neighbours to formal conversations in an office set-up or a bank, etc. Students take on the role they are representing, prepare dialogues and act them out in front of the class.
4. Short Speeches: Students are asked to select a topic in which they are interested. The topics can be technical or non-technical. Some of the topics on which students spoke are: Four-wheel drive, Functions of a crank shaft, Social media- boon or bane, My pet dog, etc.). Students are given at least a week's time to prepare and are encouraged to speak in front of the class for at least two minutes.
5. Debates: The debates usually centered on topics from the TED Talks. For instance, after watching Muniba Mazari's talk, the class debated on the news report about her husband suing her for distorting facts.

### **3.2.3. Evaluation**

The students were assessed after each activity in order to record their progress. The main objective of this study was to investigate the impact of watching TED Talks on student motivation to produce spoken language. It was seen that almost all of them took part in these speaking activities. For the purpose of analysing speech activities and reaching conclusions, data was collected in the following manner:

- i. Primarily it was done by the teacher's observation of the individual students for interaction with peers and engagement in speaking activities in the classroom.
- ii. Each activity was assessed based on predetermined parameters like the organisation of content, pronunciation, vocabulary, sentence construction and fluency.
- iii. Additionally, students were asked through a semi-structured interview how they felt about this as an activity and whether they perceived any growth in their abilities and how, why, etc.

## **4. Results and discussion**

After watching these videos for the whole semester and participating in pre-viewing and post-viewing activities, the students themselves believed that they were confident to speak in front of a group.

Students were divided into groups of ten and each group had at least four to five students, on average, who were very good at language production and hence, there was plenty of peer interaction. The students made use of every opportunity to speak that was given to the



class and this was crucial, the students opined. They also suggested that successful language production while engaging in a group activity develops in them a sense of confidence to speak the language, putting them more at ease with their peers, as the focus is on what they have just seen and heard and not on the language *per se*. Gradually, this could also have a positive impact on the students' presentation skills, language delivery and content learning.

During classroom observation, it was seen that in the beginning some students were hesitant to participate in the activities. However, as the students found these TED talks interesting, there was a meaningful discussion based on the topics, and a lot of language was generated. Since it was a discussion for the whole class, the students took part in animated conversations without the fear of being conscious of themselves or of being judged. To some extent, it developed the learner's public speaking ability. The students were able to construct complex sentences instead of generating one-word answers or phrases as seen at the beginning of the semester. They were able to speak extempore with minimum preparation and answer questions spontaneously.

The students also gave positive feedback on this exercise. One of the most impressive videos, in the opinion of this class of students, was 'Try Something New for 30 Days'. The entire class was inspired to try out something new for 30 days in order to make that into a habit. They even decided to maintain a log book to record their daily progress. Some of the things they did were as follows: do a good deed every day, help with household chores, bring home-cooked food for lunch every day, go for a walk in the evenings etc.

One of the definite findings of this study is that these TED talks generated enough motivation in the class to speak the language. In addition, there was decreased anxiety and tension on their part while speaking in front of their peers and the teacher as determined by the students' responses in the semi-structured interviews. Especially, students with inhibitions, reluctant to speak the English language earlier, were found to be enthusiastic about discussing the TED talks that they viewed in the group and the contents of the talks. Particularly, when there was a contradicting view or opinion, the discussions became interesting, resulting in enhanced language production.

Even though the skill focus of the present study was speaking and generating language as the students watched the videos, learners were engaged in a range of other processes like listening, understanding, analysing, synthesising and articulating. Hence, an opportunity was created to hone these language sub-skills as well.



## **5. Limitations of the study and implications for future research**

Every research program needs to understand and accommodate the learner variable as it also affects the outcome of the research. As mentioned earlier, in this heterogeneous group of students, there were differences in the pace of learning, learner attitudes, motivation to learn, class attendance, etc. This resulted in differences in the learning outcomes of the students and some groups of students, therefore, gained much more from the experience than others.

Although learning outcomes cannot be measured in quantifiable terms in this study, it can be said that those who were regular to class and participated in classroom activities made the most progress in terms of using English for speaking. It was seen that those who hesitated to speak in English earlier were willing to speak in front of their peers towards the end of the semester. No significant change was seen in students who were already confident in speaking in English.

Using TED Talks in the classroom reframes the traditional role of the teacher in the classroom. An important thing to keep in mind is that the teacher should control the quality and the number of videos viewed in class as it should reinforce language learning and not distract the learner from learning. Teacher autonomy is another important concept that needs attention. The proposed exercises can be done only in situations where the college management does not restrict speaking activities, which lead to some noise generation inside a classroom. Also, setting aside a part of the class for viewing these videos and constructing activities around them requires some commitment on the part of the teacher. If that is the case, the use of videos as an authentic language teaching-learning tool can be integrated into the language curriculum by a creative teacher.

Those that did not attend the classes regularly did not fare well in the final assessment conducted by the University, which the College is affiliated to, as an end of semester exam. This may be due to their missed chance at practising the language. Another reason could be the general disregard for the learning of the English language by these engineering students. There are other students who would like to believe that they are already quite proficient at it.

In terms of implications for the future, similar research can be carried out with other activities like watching and responding to news debates, advertisements, movie clips, commencement addresses, and Toastmaster's Table topic speeches to verify the impact on student learning experience. Similarly, specialised topics (especially given the fact that the target group consists of students of specialised technical courses) for individual groups maybe selected to enhance the learner experience.

## 6. Conclusion

The English language teacher may use various strategies to facilitate language learning. Using TED talks is one of the teaching-learning approaches which can supplement the traditional and formal method. This study investigated the impact of using TED Talks as a teaching-learning strategy to encourage English language production, particularly speaking, among students in an engineering college. The data for analysis were collected through classroom activities, semi-structured interviews and observation. The results show that engaging students in watching TED Talks triggers increased motivation to engage in speaking activities.

Final conclusions can be drawn only after repeated studies involving different sets of students under varied conditions and resources. Based on this study, it may be concluded that those students who attended classes regularly participated enthusiastically in most of the activities conducted in the class, and those who were motivated to learn showed a definite improvement in their communicative competence, particularly in their confidence to speak in English in front of an audience. Engaging students in such activities and providing them with varied opportunities to practise using the language is advantageous for successful language learning.

### Note

On March 1, 2018, National Geographic Learning (NGL), in partnership with TED announced the release of Learn English with TED Talks, an app for students who are learning English as a second or foreign language. This app provides a classroom presentation tool and lesson plans that enable teachers of English to integrate their students' work on the app with a meaningful classroom experience. The following sites can be used to download the App.

For Android users:

[https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.cengage.ngl.nventive.learnenglishwithtedtalks&hl=en\\_IN](https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.cengage.ngl.nventive.learnenglishwithtedtalks&hl=en_IN)

For IOS users:

<https://apps.apple.com/us/app/learn-english-nglearning/id1301395785>

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