



THE IMPACTS OF TED TALKS ON UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' LISTENING SKILLS

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Abstract:

One of the factors affecting students' attitudes positively in their learning process might be the use of technology in classroom (Al-Siyabi & Al-Aliyani, 2024). Hence, using or combining between authentic materials and technology in classrooms seems to be popular in current educational contexts, especially in EFL settings. One of the well-known platforms including sharing ideas and inspiring stories is from TED Talks (Al-Siyabi & Al-Aliyani, 2024). Besides, listening is considered as one of the most important skills for students among four skills. Therefore, the study with a qualitative method design investigated the impacts of TED talks on university students' listening skills. The research was conducted at a university in Can Tho City, Vietnam, with the participation of five English lecturers and five second-year students. The result indicated that both teachers and students shared high perspective of the impacts of TED talks on university students' listening skill. As for suggestions, students' levels and interests should be paid much attention.

Keywords: TED Talks, listening skills high perspective, university students

1. Introduction

English plays an important role in both ESL and EFL contexts. Students with good English proficiency attain numerous benefits for further academic and working goals. Using authentic materials in learning and teaching English has received much attention by educators, researchers and teachers.

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For four English skills, listening is considered as one of the most essential ones. However, a number of students struggle with the skill for several difficulties. According to Nowrouzi et al. (2015), EFL listening is viewed as a challenging skill, particularly in foreign language contexts where opportunities for real practices are limited. Besides, students should encounter authentic input since scripted content lacks redundancy of informal speech (Kimura & Middlecamp, 2027). Thus, teachers find authentic materials for improving their students' listening. TED talks videos are regarded as popular and effective sources of authentic materials in teaching and learning English. Therefore, the study tries to investigate the impacts of TED talks on university students' listening skill.

1.2 Research aims

The study sought the answers to:

- 1) to examine teachers' perspectives of the impacts of TED Talks on university students' listening skills
- 2) to investigate students' perspectives of the impacts of TED Talks on their listening skills

1.3 Research questions

- 1) How do teachers perceive the impacts of TED talks on university students' listening skill?
- 2) How do students perceive the impacts of TED talks on their listening skill?

2. Literature review

2.1 The origin of TED Talks

TED stands for Technology, Entertainment, Design and it is a non-profit organization established in 1984 by an architect named Richard Saul Wurman. From the beginning, TED Talks videos were derived from technology, science and business, but these days, the video cover a wide variety of topics, such as: innovation, environment, culture, education and so on. The length of a video is approximately 18 minutes.

2.2 The success of TED Talks videos

From the study of Al-Jarf (2021), these videos are produced based on presentations given at the primary TED conference and various TED events across the globe. The spotlight of TED Talks is that they attract different speakers or presenters including politicians, celebrities, influencers, experts, scholars and the like. According to Kessler (2011), TED Talks' website has reached 500 million views, one million followers on Facebook and one million downloads on iPad.

2.3 Listening skills

Listening is the most significant for daily life among English skill (Morley, 1991). From Tran et al. (2021), listening provides us essential input for survival and communication. Listening is an ability to comprehend spoken language at a normal speed (Chastain,

1971). Besides, listening is a complicated interpretation process that listeners compare what they hear to what they know (Rost, 2002). In addition, Tyagi (2013) addresses that there are five stages of the listening process, namely hearing, understanding, remembering, evaluating and responding.

According to Maharani et al. (2023, July), for English language learners, listening is an essential skill to develop since it allows them to understand what they hear from others, which facilitates their assimilation of the speaker's knowledge. Moreover, because it delivers input that language learners must understand in order to learn anything, listening is crucial for language acquisition (Maharani et al., 2023, July). Also, listening skill plays a crucial role in EFL learning because language acquisition depends on receiving language input (Hamouda, 2013).

2.4 Listening strategies

Several perspectives or beliefs about listening strategies are shown by multiple researchers and authors. Brown (2001) synthesizes that two listening strategies are bottom-up and top-down. Bottom-up refers sounds, vocabulary and grammatical structures while top-down uses background information and context to infer meaning. In addition, there are two other strategies, namely meta-cognitive and cognitive strategies. Meta-cognitive one is related to planning and managing whereas cognitive relies on processing information. Tran et al. (2021) mention that meta-cognitive encourages learners to have their autonomy. Also, cognitive strategy is utilized to process and store new information (Goh, 1998). Moreover, socio-affective strategies relate to managing emotions, reducing anxiety and working with others to develop comprehension. According to Griffiths (2010), these are activities that people choose to modify their language learning. In addition, learners play an active role in controlling and finding the most appropriate methods for practicing and improving their learning (Tran et al., 2021).

2.5 Listening problems

There are a variety of listening problems for EFL students. Vandergrift (1999) points out that listening comprehension is a complex interactive process that requires listeners to pay attention to multiple elements, including sounds, intonation, linguistic structures and social contexts. Furthermore, various factors such as speaker's speed, accent, topic and lack of attention can lead to the challenges for listening comprehension (Goh, 2000). Additionally, Ulum (2015) emphasizes that various and unfamiliar accents, pronunciation result in students' listening difficulties. In the same vein, the most significant elements affecting listeners' understanding are the intonation or pronunciation of a speaker (Goh, 1998).

Besides, lack of previous knowledge and unfamiliar topics make it difficult for listeners to understand the messages (Underwood, 1989). Underwood (1989) emphasizes that insufficient vocabulary is another listening difficulty.

2.6 The relationship between TED Talks and listening skill

TED Talks videos consider as a beneficial resource for promoting listening and vocabulary abilities (Maharani et al., 2023). Likewise, TED Talks videos with the focus on educational context can be utilized as instructional media or authentic listening resources to enhance the creativity and interest of the learning process (Novia et al., 2023). From the study of Gavenila et al. (2021), students' enthusiasm, new vocabulary, listening fluency and understanding are promoted by the frequent help of watching TED videos.

2.7 Related studies

Various studies were conducted to examine the effects of using TED Talks videos on students' listening skill. Martínez and Vargas (2018) carried out a qualitative action research at a public school in Colombia. The study investigated TED Talks as an ICT tool to develop communicative skills. The participants were 31 high school students graded 11th. The research used interviews, questionnaires, teacher journals. The intervention used TED Talks was applied every week with four sessions. Task-based approach including pre-task, task cycle and language focus was used for each session. For results, students gained motivation in English classes. Also, they had confidence in communicating with their friends when they learned appropriate words, vocabulary in proper contexts. Furthermore, they realized that they should not lack their confidence because they had different pronunciation besides American and British. Moreover, the social and cultural aspects of most of TED Talks' themes were highly appreciated by learners.

Maharani et al. (2023) conducted a quasi-experimental research at a secondary school in Indonesia. The study explored the effectiveness of TED Talks videos on students' listening abilities. 66 students participated in the study. The participants were divided into two groups, namely experimental and control group. However, students of the experimental group were instructed by TED Talks video while those of the control group studied traditional lesson plan. The findings indicated that listening skill of students in the experimental group was improved.

Rosanti (2025) studied students' perceptions of using TED Talks videos for listening comprehension at an Indonesian university through a narrative study. Narrative frames and semi-structured interviews were used in the study. Only three students took part in the research. The result indicated that students' listening comprehension were enhanced by the use of TED Talks. Also, students gained their motivation and confidence. Besides, fast speech and new words were their challenges in using TED Talks.

In addition to foreign studies, Vietnamese articles also found out about the same issue. Duong and Nguyen (2022) investigated the students' perceptions of the factors of their choices for TED Talks videos. 60 sophomore participated in the study. The questionnaire, tests and interviews are used in the research. The result concluded that students' choices for TED Talks were affected by varied factors, but the popular ones were from speakers' accent, speech rate, vocabulary complexity and length of the talks.

Also, listening comprehension and other parts like vocabulary, background knowledge, pronunciation, accent, motivation was enhanced.

Several studies explored the impact of using TED Talks in learning and teaching process, but little research was carried out to show the relationship between TED Talk and a specific ability as listening and conducted in Vietnamese contexts, particularly for university. Therefore, this was the gap among previous studies, and this study sought to examine the impacts of TED talks on university students' listening skill.

3. Research Methodology

A qualitative method was employed to approach the research questions in the study. Specifically, semi-structured interviews were chosen to use in the research. They were delivered to conduct on both teachers and students.

Five lecturers at the same university in Can Tho City, Vietnam, were the target participants of the study. For lecturers, they had the variety of factors related to age, gender, English proficiency and years of teaching English.

The interviews were recorded and then transcribed by the acceptance of all the participants.

4. Findings and discussion

The 6-step thematic analysis was used to analyze the qualitative data

4.1 Teachers' perspectives of TED talks in teaching listening

All of the teacher participants shared the same answer that they have used TED Talks videos in their classes, especially for their listening periods. Teacher 1 noted:

"I have used TED Talks videos in my classes for many years, especially in listening and speaking lessons for students from lower-intermediate to advanced levels." (Interview extract).

In addition, most of lecturers appreciated the effectiveness of these videos for students' listening skills. Three of them considered the videos as "authentic materials." And Teachers 2 and 4 posed:

"They are a valuable source of authentic materials." (Interview extract)

"They are beneficial for students so they become authentic resources or materials." (Interview extract).

An interviewee mentioned very carefully and specifically. He said:

"I think TED Talks are highly effective for teaching listening skills because they expose students to real-life language, various accents, and meaningful topics. They also increase students' motivation compared to traditional materials." (Interview extract)

4.2 Advantages of using TED talks

Almost all teachers agreed with the diversity and reality in terms of topic and language use in these kind of videos. Teachers 2, 3 and 5 mentioned:

"One major advantage is authenticity. ... Another important advantage is the quality of the content." (Interview extract)

"The videos provide hot and updated topic with related vocabulary students can learn. The videos also have scripts so that listeners can easily follow. Also, it is very easy for students to get access to any videos when they are on the Internet." (Interview extract)

"TED Talks cover meaningful topics such as education, technology, psychology, creativity, and social issues. So students are not only improving their listening, but also broadening their knowledge and critical thinking." (Interview extract)

Compared to traditional materials, most of teachers believed that TED Talks were natural and useful. One representative of the teachers stated:

"Traditional listening materials are often simplified. The speed is controlled, the vocabulary is limited, and the structure is designed mainly for practice. ... TED Talks, on the other hand, expose students to natural speech. Speakers have different accents, speaking styles, emotions, and ways of organizing ideas. This makes the listening experience richer and more realistic." (Interview extract).

4.3 Challenges of using TED Talks

Besides several benefits, these videos have some shortcomings for both teachers and students in teaching and learning process.

4.3.1 Challenges for teachers

Two out of five interviewees had similar perspectives that the topics were various but they did not fit to the learning objectives or outcome, so they took time to edit. Teachers 1 and 3 added:

"TED Talks videos are normally lengthy, so teachers have to edit or cut them like they want." (Interview extract)

"Some of them are too broad and too formal to adapt and use in classes." (Interview extract)

4.3.2 Challenges for students

Five participants all agreed that learners found hard to understand the background knowledge or unfamiliar topics. Teacher 5 indicated:

"Sometimes the topic is unfamiliar, especially when it involves science, technology, or abstract social issues. In those cases, students are not only dealing with language difficulties, but also with conceptual difficulties." (Interview extract)

4.4 The impacts of TED talks on university students' listening skills

All teachers said that the videos affected students' listening skills positively, but they emphasized listening for gist and identifying key ideas. One of them addressed:

"... they improve in listening for gist. TED Talks help students learn how to catch the overall message instead of trying to understand every single word. This is a very important habit in real-life listening." (Interview extract)

A teacher mentioned about inferential listening in using TED Talks videos. She stated:

"In TED Talks, students often need to understand not only what the speaker says, but also why they say it, what attitude they show, and what message they want the audience to take away." (Interview extract).

4.5 Suggestions for better use of TED talks in classes

Five interviewees took into consideration students' levels and interests in terms of choosing the videos in listening classes. Teacher 4 posed:

"Teachers should not choose a TED Talk only because they personally find it inspiring. The video must match the students' language level, background knowledge, and the lesson objectives." (Interview extract)

Teacher 2 had different sharing:

"Teachers should choose videos with short speed and length so that even weak students can follow and understand." (Interview extract)

Two teachers paid attention to using subtitle in a strategic way.

"I usually let students listen without subtitles first, and then use subtitles later to confirm information, correct misunderstandings, and highlight useful language. In this way, subtitles support listening rather than replace it." (Interview extract)

4.6 Students' perspectives of the impacts of TED talks videos on their listening skills

4.6.1 Strengths of TED Talks videos

Five students all agreed that the contents of these kind of videos were informative, updated and interesting.

Student 1 (S1) said:

"I think the contents in TED Talks are quite diverse and interesting from many aspects of human lives not only for studying." (Interview extract)

And Student 2 shared:

"One of the best things of TED Talks is the up-to-date contents, so the listeners or audiences never get bored." (Interview extract).

Also, a student participant preferred the inspiring and meaningful factors of the stories in the videos. He said:

"Some of contents are so inspiring and touching for audiences." (Interview extract)

Besides the contents, three out of five participants mentioned that they liked the videos because of the speakers, their favorite celebrities. One of the representative indicated:

"I like and subscribe the channel because I do not want to miss out any upcoming videos. Sometimes I listen to my favorite celebrities as speakers.... I had a good chance to listen to my favorite idol, Khanh Vy-a famous Vietnamese Television MC- when she told her own life stories. She inspired me a lot ..." (Interview extract)

4.6.2 Students' difficulties

Three interviewees supposed that speed and structures using in the videos are main difficulties when listening. Student 4 addressed:

"In some videos, the speed of speakers is too fast and their English structures are too difficult. Without subtitles, I cannot understand ..." (Interview extract)

Also, Student 3 mentioned

"Some topics are too academic and broad for students to understand." (Interview extract)

Then Student 5 shared the thought.

"Different accents of speakers can be a big challenge for listeners like me." (Interview extract)

4.6.3 The impacts of TED talks on listening skill

Most of students believed that TED Talks impacted their listening skills in terms of lexical resources and main ideas.

Student 2 stated:

"I realize my listening comprehension was improved by watching those videos. I enhance guessing new words and identify main themes or ideas when listening to videos. ... Also I practice taking notes ..." (Interview extract)

Next, Student 3 mentioned:

"Thanks to TED Talks, I can learn and even upgrade my vocabulary in different contexts. I can use and apply for my speaking skill." (Interview extract)

Two out of five participants (S4 and S5) related the impacts of TED Talks on other skill as speaking.

"I can practice the way I express or organize the ideas when communicating with other people and speaking in front of the crowds." (Interview extract).

"I learn a lot from the speakers, like adjusting the tone of voices and intonation ..." (Interview extract).

4.6.4 Suggestions for using TED talks

All students agreed that teachers should start from easy to hard videos according to the speed and level used in the videos. Student 5 expressed:

"Some short videos with understandable contents and topics should be first used so that we can get familiar and do not feel overwhelmed." (Interview extract)

Five students believed that videos based on learners' interests were more effective. And as a representative, S4 added:

"Teachers should choose the videos related to their learners' needs or interests. It will be better ..." (Interview extract).

Student 5 suggested:

"Even the videos are assigned in class or as a homework, teachers need to have a clear and detailed instructions so that all type of students can follow and understand well." (Interview extract).

4.7 Discussion

The finding from semi-structured interviews showed that teachers had high perspectives of using TED Talks videos on students' listening skills. This was new among previous studies. It could be explained that teachers recognized the positive changes in their students' performance, particularly in listening comprehension as main ideas, listening for gist.

Another important point was that the student participants acknowledged the impacts of TED talks on university students' listening skill. This was consistent with the study of Rosanti (2025). Students perceived the effects of TED Talks on their listening comprehension.

The finding also revealed that lecturers paid attention to students' levels and interests in choosing the videos. This was in line with the Vietnamese study conducted by Duong and Nguyen (2022). Learners' choices and levels should be taken into consideration in terms of choosing TED Talks videos.

5. Conclusion

Using TED Talks videos has become popular in EFL contexts, including tertiary settings. Teachers had high perspectives of using TED Talks videos in listening class because of authenticity and diversity. Moreover, learners shared high perspectives of the impacts of those kind of videos on their listening skills, especially for their listening comprehension. For better use of these videos in teaching and learning, students' levels and interests should be taken into account.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to express their sincere gratitude to the five English lecturers and five second-year students at a university in Can Tho City, Vietnam, for their enthusiastic participation and for generously sharing their valuable insights during the interviews. Their contributions were instrumental in deepening the understanding of how TED Talks can support the development of English listening skills in EFL classrooms. The authors also extend their appreciation to the institutional support that facilitated the data collection process. Finally, the authors would like to thank the Editorial Board of the *European Journal of Alternative Education Studies* for providing the opportunity to disseminate this research to a wider academic audience, particularly those interested in the pedagogical use of TED Talks as authentic materials to enhance English listening skills in Vietnamese higher education.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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