



Exploring the Potential of TED Talks for Teaching Business English to University Students

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Introduction

We live in a rapidly changing world but course books still take several years to be published. By then, the ideas, vocabulary, and educational context contained in the chosen texts is outdated and as a result has much less validity. The internet can fill this gap if the course books are supplemented by online material. With digital videos continuing to gain popularity, it seems natural that this medium extends into the education setting. Teachers and students have access to a vast variety of online audiovisual resources, which bring the outside world into the classroom, provide authentic contexts in which English is used, expose students to different varieties and accents of English, and give supplementary listening practice.

One well-known resource is TED.com, which has become a worldwide phenomenon. It is a platform where the brightest minds – scientists, designers, researchers, company CEOs and inventors – go to spread their ideas. Many of these leaders deliver their insights at TED conferences around the world, which are then uploaded onto TED.com. The scope of topics is enormous and the materials are of very high quality, free of charge and constantly updated. There are about 400 talks on business, which can be used to the benefit of university students studying Business as their major and also English for professional communication as a part of their university curriculum.

The following research question was posed:

What is the effect of using TED talks in a pre-service business English course on university students' listening, reading, writing and speaking skills?

Literature Review

TED Talks as a Teaching Tool

In recent studies, TED talks are mostly explored in connection with extensive listening for enhancing listening comprehension skills of university students (Abdulrahman, 2017; Floyd & Jeschull, 2012; Park & Cha, 2013; Seung, 2014; Takaesu, 2017; Wingrove, 2017). The studies conclude that TED talks provide a range of academic listening applications. The findings indicate improvement in the students'

listening comprehension and pronunciation skills, the increase of motivation, active vocabulary, and the ability to understand different English accents.

As a multi-sensory video medium, TED talks offer students more than listening comprehension (Terantino, 2011). Coxhead and Walls (2012) and Nurmukhamedov (2017) studied TED talks as a useful resource to promote vocabulary instruction. The studies examined the lexical coverage of TED talks by using a corpus of TED talks presentations. Nurmukhamedov's findings suggest that 4,000 word families provided 95% coverage, and 8,000 word families provided 98% coverage of TED Talks presentations. That means that TED Talks could be effectively used for higher intermediate and advanced English learners.

Bianchi and Marenzi (2016) illustrated the use of TED talks for teaching discourse comprehension integrated in a module on consecutive interpreting for MA students studying English as their main foreign language. Metruk (2018) found that watching the videos with English subtitles (rather than L1 subtitles) could lead to improved reading comprehension.

Using authentic videos promotes the development of writing skills (Hanley et al., 1995). However not much research is found about the potential of TED talks for developing writing skills except Wagner (2011) and Hashimoto, Fukuda and Okazaki (2015). Wagner (2011) suggested that TED talks could be the basis for a larger project incorporating research and writing skills, enabling learners to focus not only on grammatical correctness and organization, but on such issues as the target audience, genre and written output.

The incorporation of TED talks into public speaking instruction can be beneficial for English language learners (Chang & Huang, 2015; Leopold, 2016). The use of corpus-based move analysis to study TED talks has resulted in the development of a genre prototype based on move frequencies, lengths, and patterns of occurrence and associations, which has helped learners to understand and produce the genre of public presentation (Chang & Huang, 2015). The students showed progress in applying the techniques learned from analyzing TED talks "to get audience's attention and make the supporting points in their own presentations memorable" (Leopold, 2016, p. 54).

There are few studies devoted to the possible application and benefits of TED talks in ESP specifically. Ishinuki (2014) explored the attitudes of technical college engineering students towards TED talks as a learning resource. The study displayed an overall increase in students' motivation after using TED talks due to their authenticity and more individualized attention to student needs, wants and interests. "Students' recognition of the necessity of studying English is reinforced by their interest in the topics of TED talks and also using authentic English texts as a learning resource" (p. 133). Hashimoto et al. (2015) in the same ESP context of science and technology, found progress in students' summary writing skills after introducing TED talks on technical topics.

Danilina and Shabunina (2018) studied TED talks in the ESP context for philosophy students. They come up to the conclusion that TED talks in the ESP classroom may benefit students by "its explicit emphasis on the content" and it gives them a chance "to acquire syntax, lexis, and discourse style skills as a by-product of content-oriented learning" (p. 47).

Rudneva, Valeeva, Faizi, Guslyakova, and Nigmatzyanova (2019) investigated the effect of implementing TED talks in the ESP course for undergraduate RUDN University students of the Ecological faculty, where TED talks were used to extend the listening component of the course. The results demonstrated a significant improvement in listening comprehension among the upper-intermediate and advanced groups after using the video content.

However, only two studies were found on using TED talks for teaching Business English (Ramejkis, n.d.; Salem, 2019). Both of them explored the impact of using TED Talks on improving oral presentation skills of Business English students. It was revealed that Business majors in the experimental group are more enthusiastic, energetic and motivated as they became more confident and free of anxiety and tension (Salem, 2019).

This report contributes to filling this gap in the literature relating to how TED talks can be exploited for teaching Business English to university students

Methodology

Participants and Materials

The experimental teaching took place in the 2018-2019 academic year while teaching Business English (ESAP module) at the Business and Management Department of the National Research University Higher School of Economics, Moscow, Russia.

Ninety-three bachelor's students, whose English proficiency was tested at B2-C1 according to CEFR, participated in the study. They were randomly assigned to the experimental group (n = 48, mean age 19) or the control group (n = 45, mean age 19). The experimental phase lasted for six months and in total took 48 sessions of 90 minutes. The teacher was the same for both groups.

Both the experimental and control groups used the course book 'English for Business Studies in Higher Education' (Walker, Harvey, & Phillips, 2013), which is a skills-based course designed specifically for students of business who are about to enter EMI at tertiary level.

Each unit of the course consisted of four lessons. Lesson 1 is devoted to learning business vocabulary and developing vocabulary skills such as word-building, use of synonyms for paraphrasing. Lesson 2 aims at reading or listening development. In Lesson 3, the students are introduced to a writing assignment or to a spoken language point (for example, giving an oral presentation), which is further developed in Lesson 4. In Lesson 4, the students are given listening or reading tasks to practice further their new skills. In Lessons 2-4, in addition to the course book materials, the teacher used authentic materials from the websites www.youtube.com, www.forbes.com, www.tutor2u.net, www.businessinsider.com to boost student's motivation and language skills.

For the experimental group Lesson 4 was substituted for one of the TED talk lessons relevant to every unit theme of the course (Stognieva, 2019). For example, the TED talk 'How to build a business that lasts 100 years', was included in the unit *The business of business*, which is devoted to the history of business, types of business, and the factors for business sustainability. The control group were given listening and reading texts on the same topic (Walker et. al., 2013, pp.10-11, p. 116). All the other classroom activities and teaching approaches remained the same.

Testing Procedures

The pretest-posttest comparative method with experimental-control groups was used in the research. Both groups were tested using the same pre- and posttests based on the TED talks. To ensure the validity of the assessment and to avoid familiarity effects they were not studied in the main course. Pretest-posttest intervention data were collected and then analyzed by means of independent samples t-tests, run by IBM SPSS Statistics for Windows, Version 21.0.

The pretest was conducted to assess student language skills in experimental and control groups prior to intervention. The posttest explored the effectiveness of the method.

The four skills are strongly correlated, but not to the degree that a measure of one can substitute perfectly for the measure of another (Powers, 2010). Each skill was assessed separately according to a 10-point grading scale.

To assess listening, the students were asked to watch a TED talk without subtitles and answer ten comprehension questions based on the content. The aim of this assignment was to check how the students could follow the ideas of the TED talk and identify the speaker's point of view.

To assess reading comprehension skills, the students were given a transcript of a TED talk for detailed reading and were then asked to fill in a table with the specific information. As the task was to identify specific information, the transcript was used although this is the written representation of an oral text rather than what might be considered more genuine reading material.

To assess writing, students had to write an argumentative essay of 200-250 words by selecting and reporting the main ideas of a TED talk using a given prompt. The students were to produce a coherent and

structured assignment. The essays were scored using a rubric consisting of the following criteria: task achievement, coherence and cohesion, the use of vocabulary, grammatical range and accuracy.

To assess speaking, students were asked to respond to the issues discussed in the TED talk in an interactive form. To stimulate discussion the ESP instructor asked clarifying questions. The speaking part was recorded and then scored by three independent assessors according to the following criteria: fluency and coherence, lexical resource, grammatical range and accuracy, pronunciation. Then the average score for each student was calculated.

Hypotheses

The study was conducted to test the following null hypothesis:

- 1) There is no statistically significant difference between the control and experimental groups in mean pretest skill scores.
- 2) There is no statistically significant difference between the control and experimental groups in mean posttest skill scores.
- 3) There is no statistically significant difference between the control and experimental groups in mean gain skill scores.

Findings

TABLE 1
Pretest Results for the Experimental and Control Groups

Skills	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t-value	Sig
Listening	control	45	5.2444	0.71209	1.017	0.312
	experimental	48	5.0625	0.99800		
Reading	control	45	5.3333	0.79772	-0.295	0.769
	experimental	48	5.3958	1.21585		
Writing	control	45	4.8222	0.71633	0.630	0.530
	experimental	48	4.7083	1.00970		
Speaking	control	45	5.4222	0.69048	-0.552	0.582
	experimental	48	5.5208	1.01036		

The obtained t-values and their significance levels are shown in Table 1. According to the data, there are no statistically significant differences in pretest scores between the experimental and control groups. Both groups gained similar mean scores of between 4.7 and 5.5 on pretesting. *P*-values (> 0.1) indicate strong evidence for the first null hypothesis, so group equivalence is stated.

TABLE 2
Posttest Results for the Experimental and Control Groups

Skills	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t-value	Sig
Listening	control	45	6.8667	0.84208	-4.662	0.000
	experimental	48	7.8125	1.10427		
Reading	control	45	7.0667	1.03133	-2.719	0.008
	experimental	48	7.6875	1.16977		
Writing	control	45	6.6667	1.67874	-2.306	0.023
	experimental	48	7.4167	1.45622		
Speaking	control	45	6.7333	0.98627	-5.531	0.000
	experimental	48	7.8542	0.96733		

The data in Table 2 indicate growth in all scores from pretest to posttest. They indicate strong evidence against the second null hypothesis, so it is rejected. There is a statistically significant difference between the experimental and control groups in favor of the experimental group. The differences are larger for listening ($p < .001$) and speaking ($p < .001$) than for reading ($p < .01$) and writing ($p < .05$).

To compare the performance of students in the experimental and control groups the t-test with gain scores was conducted to evaluate the effect of experimental teaching.

TABLE 3

The Difference in Gain Scores between the Experimental and Control Groups

Skills	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t-value	Sig
Listening	control	45	1,6222	0.83364	-6.044	0.000
	experimental	48	2,7500	0.95650		
Reading	control	45	1,7333	1.19469	-2.245	0.027
	experimental	48	2,2917	1.20210		
Writing	control	45	1,8444	1.95350	-2.333	0.022
	experimental	48	2,7083	1.61058		
Speaking	control	45	1,3111	1.20269	-4.558	0.000
	experimental	48	2,3333	0.95279		

Table 3 shows that the experimental teaching improved grades in both groups. In the control group, the grades improved by 1.6 points, in the experimental group on average by 2.6 points. There is a notable difference between the experimental and control groups in the improvement in listening ($p < .001$), reading ($p < .05$), writing ($p < .05$) and speaking ($p < .001$) scores in favor of the experimental group. The data indicate strong evidence against the third null hypothesis.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study investigated the effects of integrating TED talks into a pre-service Business English course on university students' listening, reading, writing and speaking skills. The findings indicated significant differences between the experimental and control groups due to the integration of TED talks, which is consistent with prior research on specific skills: listening (Abdulrahman, 2017; Floyd & Jeschull, 2012; Ishinuki, 2014; Park & Cha, 2013; Seung, 2014; Rudneva et al., 2019; Takaesu, 2017; Wingrove, 2017), speaking (Chang & Huang, 2015; Leopold, 2016), reading (Bianchi & Marenzi, 2016; Metruk, 2018) and writing (Hashimoto et al. 2015; Wagner, 2011). The present study has shown that TED talks can enhance exposure to Business English and develop and integrate the four skills.

Motivation should be also taken into account while considering the results of the research. Because of the subject-matter and up-to-date content of the TED talks selected for the course, which describe contemporary business issues of modern companies and acquaint students with business practices from around the world, the students from the experimental group were more engaged in discussions with their groupmates and more willing to express their ideas. Students could take advantage of the speakers' experience to assume and defend what they think about a particular topic (Maria, Junior, & Astrid, 2018).

In ESP, teachers do not 'teach writing' but teach particular kinds of writing which are valued and expected in academic or professional contexts (Hyland, 2013). The Experimental group achieved higher scores in writing. This may be due to the fact that Ted talks follow the structure of an argumentative essay in the form of a talk. The Ted talk speakers are trying to prove one single point; they all have reasoning and evidence in the form of statistics. Having such examples, the students can better learn how to produce target genre essays.

However, TED talks go beyond inspiring conversations, questions and critical thinking in the ESP classroom. Since they are observed through both the visual and auditory channels, learners are able to make more relevant associations that help with memory and recall. (Mayer, 2001). The TED speakers

often provide visual prompts that facilitate the perception of information. TED talks increase knowledge retention since they can be replayed as many times as needed or can be reviewed after the initial lesson was taught. That might affect the results of the experimental group having higher scores in posttests.

It seems natural that this familiar and widespread platform is extended into the ESP setting. TED talks can facilitate language learning, but the results of the implementation depend on how pedagogically appropriate they are and how effectively they are integrated into the ESP course. TED talks should be reviewed, evaluated and selected according to professionally relevant content, educational value, the number of views, date of production and difficulty level with reference to a particular ESP course. First, the subject matter of the course should be defined and the scope of lessons determined. The outlined lesson design and the types of activities corresponding to the teaching aims, including other resources, should be developed. Finally, the lesson should be piloted in the classroom to ensure that it is well designed, and then adapted if needed.

As with any research, this study does have limitations: time constraints only allowed two groups of students to be studied and students were in an EFL environment sharing the same L1, which could affect the generalizability of the study. Also, given the complexity of the whole task and the vastness of the Ted talk collection, time must be spent in order to prepare well-structured lessons. As noted above the structure of TED talks is similar to an argument essay and the transcripts were used as reading material. Although this material improved students' reading skills further research will use published articles on related topics.

The results presented in this report have highlighted a number of topics on which further research would be beneficial. The sample size and scope of study could be expanded by engaging other teachers who are ready to integrate TED talks in other ESP courses. Additional research could be conducted to determine the effect of integrating TED talks at lower levels of language proficiency. A more detailed exploration of the effect of motivation is another area that could be explored in more depth.

The Author

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Appendix

TED Talks Selected for the Business English Course

1. 'How China is changing the future of shopping' (by Angela Wang, 2017)
2. 'How I became an entrepreneur at 66' (by Paul Tasner, 2017)
3. 'How to build a business that lasts 100 years' (by Martin Reeves, 2016)
4. 'The basics of AI for business' (Philipp Gerbert, 2017)
5. 'The business benefits of doing good' (Wendy Woods, 2017)
6. 'The future of money' (by Neha Narula, 2016)
7. 'Uber's plan to get more people into fewer cars' (by Travis Kalanick, 2016)
8. 'What really motivates people to be honest in business' (by Alexander Wagner, 2016)
9. 'Why jobs of the future won't feel like work' (by David Lee, 2017)
10. 'Why the best hire might not have the perfect resume' (by Regina Hartley, 2015)