

## TED TALKS AS A TOOL FOR ENHANCING LISTENING COMPREHENSION

*The paper focuses on the use of audiovisuals, namely TED talks as a tool to develop listening comprehension. TED talks provide a useful practice for students to expand their learning experiences in authentic contexts. The benefits of exploiting these talks in class are highlighted. The variety of topics enables teachers to integrate the talks into English for Academic Purposes (EAP) / English for Specific Purposes (ESP) classes matching the subject content with course content. Practical applications for the classroom are suggested in the paper.*

**Key words:** TED talks, listening comprehension, pre-, while- and post-listening activities, listening strategies, English for Academic Purposes, English for Specific Purposes, advanced level

The use of technology in classroom has been on the scene for several decades and has greatly affected the learning and teaching process. As teachers nowadays face more challenges to attract and retain their students' attention than they did in the past, technology has come to modernize teaching and change the traditional classroom. Multimedia resources have created opportunities for effective and diversified instruction. They have an enormous potential that can be exploited in language education. One of the options is the use of audiovisuals that specifically aid learners to improve their listening comprehension. The present paper will focus on teaching listening comprehension skills through such video media as TED talks.

With the advancement of communicative teaching where the focus shifted from studying English as a system to studying it as a tool for communication, *listening skills* assumed a central role in language learning. Foreign language competence is impossible without good listening skills: that is why listening component is incorporated in many types of exams like TOEFL and IELTS. In many parts of the globe it is included in school leaving exams, as well as university entrance exams. In particular, the role of listening in teaching cannot be underestimated in countries where English is a foreign language and there is limited exposure to the target language outside the classroom.

The increased role of listening skills poses greater importance on teaching activities for fostering listening comprehension. There is "experimental evidence indicating that listening practice is more important for oral skills development than

speaking practice” /Celce-Murcia, Olshtain, 2000: 107/. But actually, what percentage of classroom time is devoted to listening? Twenty percent? Ten percent? None? Classes without or with little listening component are a reality. Such situations have several reasons: lack of facilities and technology, insufficiency of time and relevant resources. Quite often a listening component is not a part of a test/exam. Inattention to listening instruction can be a matter of teacher preferences and lack of special training: some teachers feel more comfortable teaching reading, writing, grammar and vocabulary. In large classes the listening practice may become ineffective because of lack of student discipline leading to frequent distraction and noise. Recurrently teachers witness a situation, when in a class of 20-25 students only 5-6 people *are* actually paying attention to listening. This can be partially explained by the fact that listening is viewed by many learners as a passive skill and its primacy for language acquisition is not foregrounded. Hence, for instructional purposes students should be brought to “an understanding that listening is not a passive skill, but an active receptive skill which needs special study. This goal can be accomplished gradually as a part of skill-building activities. Learners can be guided to realize that achieving skill in listening requires as much work as does becoming skilled in reading, writing, and speaking in a second language” /Morley, 2001: 72/.

Observations on teaching listening comprehension have shown that too much time is dedicated to pre-listening and post-listening activities whereas very little time is allocated to while-listening activities and to actual listening /McCaughey, 2015: 2/. One of the main principles for improving listening comprehension is to increase the amount of listening time in class /Peterson, 2001: 89/. Researchers state that treating listening material as a text and devising exercises based on lexis/grammar equals it to reading comprehension. Many listening materials contain activities that focus on general intelligence. However, it should be taken into account that the type of listening activity depends on the *purpose* of listening and the overall *proficiency* of students. Students with low proficiency need more preparation and introduction to the topic prior to listening, so it is essential to familiarize them with linguistic content of the text providing them with background knowledge and any relevant cultural information to comprehend the listening passage as well as exposing them to listening material several times. Depending on the purpose of listening the activities may vary. With high-proficiency students the listening should expose them as much as possible to real-life situations with no opportunities for a repeat listening. Developing abilities needed to process real-time authentic discourse is key. Empowering students to take responsibility for their learning, they should be able to manage their own motivation for a listening task and develop a positive attitude toward it. As Richards points out, “current views of listening emphasize the role of the listener, who is seen as an active participant in listening, employing strategies to facilitate, monitor, and evaluate his or her listening” /Richards, 2008: 56/. Teaching effective listening involves selection of

authentic input sources, design of well-structured tasks, and use of metacognitive and cognitive listening strategies and integration of listening with other learning purposes, i.e., speaking, reading and writing /Rost, 2001: 11/.

In making choices about the content of language in listening an important factor is its pertinence to learners' interest and needs. It is essential that students have a motivational incentive to listen throughout the listening activity. Longer talks can hold attention if they are real-life, relevant and encourage critical thinking. As mentioned above, the web provides diverse sources and formats of authentic materials. The availability of internet downloads of sound and video files enable teachers to opt for useful materials for language learning and particularly enhancing listening skills. The positive impact of using videos in class are apparent: videos promote the motivation to listen, expose learners to authentic language use, make the paralinguistic features of spoken text become available to the learners and aid them to understand the cultural contexts in which the language is used /Flowerdew, Miller, 2005: 172/. Though the audiovisual media may be a popular tool to use with students, teachers should not forget about their educational purpose. For this reason, teachers and curriculum developers should consider an array of questions before launching audiovisuals in the classroom, e.g., how do audiovisuals support the curriculum, how can students and teachers develop academic listening and conversational listening activities based on them, how will the language learner benefit from their use in the classroom, how will the comprehension of the video by the language learners be assessed /Canning-Wilson, 2000/.

An invaluable resource for authentic listening practice are TED talks, an audio and video series. TED talks are delivered and filmed at the annual TED conference and the best are available online. The speakers are celebrities, businesspeople, politicians, innovators, inventors, scientists, educators and other professionals with a strong and powerful vision of their own. Just to name a few, Bill Clinton, David Cameron, Al Gore, Bill Gates and Stephen Hawking gave talks at different times. People from all walks of life, professions and nationality are united with a common passion feature, motivation and ideas they want to share. Because these ideas are based on work-life experiences, observations, beliefs they are extremely inspirational, ambitious and thought-provoking. The scope of topics is versatile to cater to various learner interests and preferences. TED's mission is to spread its speakers' ideas globally. The speakers (both native and non-native) come from different parts of the world so listeners are exposed to different Englishes, different accents, and different cultures. These talks are intended for a broad audience, they are casual and avail in colloquial expressions, though the vocabulary might be advanced. TED talks are a first-rate teaching/learning resource for various student groups, including students enrolled in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) / English for Specific Purposes (ESP) programmes.

Many talks can be hard to understand due to the complex nature of subject. When choosing a talk for the class it is important to consider both the content suitability for students and appropriateness to their level of proficiency. That is why the talks should be prevalently used in graduate high-intermediate/advanced classes. Peterson notes that “advanced students are no longer simply learning to listen or listening to learn the language. They are listening in the language to learn about the content of other areas” /Peterson, 2001: 97/. The purpose of authentic materials is primarily to communicate meaning, and TED talks are no exception. On the other hand, learners at low-intermediate/intermediate levels can also benefit from TED talks, as the transcripts of talks are downloadable, can be printed out and studied. Many talks are translated into different languages which can also aid students in the learning process. Teachers who have used TED talks in their classes recommend a variety of activities and generously share their experiences through teaching websites. Most talks are 15 to 18 minutes in length. In this sense they are like short academic lectures delivered in an informal, conversational style. Due to the original ideas voiced by TED speakers the talks are an excellent starting point for generating lively discussions.

In searching what might be of interest to Economics graduate students I came across a TED talk by Chen M. Keith, a behavioral economist from Yale University /Chen M. Keith. *Could your language affect your ability to save money?* /[https://www.ted.com/talks/keith\\_chen\\_could\\_your\\_language\\_affect\\_your\\_ability\\_to\\_save\\_money//](https://www.ted.com/talks/keith_chen_could_your_language_affect_your_ability_to_save_money//). In his very provocative talk (following a research at Yale University) Chen came up with an idea grown into a hypothesis that the savings behavior of different nationalities are related to the language they speak. In his research Chen tests a linguistic-savings hypothesis: that being required to speak in a distinct way about future events leads speakers to take fewer future-oriented actions. He suggests that the language we speak may impact the way we think about our future. Chen has published a research article on his findings, so I refer teachers who will be using this particular talk in their class to familiarize themselves with the paper /see Chen, 2013/ to become more knowledgeable about the topic.

As Chen’s talk touches upon two seemingly unrelated fields, – linguistics and economics, – for students with non-linguistic background assigning a pre-listening homework task is helpful, namely, they are asked to search information on Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis (SWH) [1].The talk is not directly related to SWH, but M. Keith Chen views his hypothesis as an instance of SWH and mentions that it is, “to his knowledge, the first to connect language structure and decision making” /Chen 2013: 695/. In class, as a pre-listening activity, students discuss the main points of the hypothesis, with the teacher facilitating the discussion and elaborating on some interesting points of the hypothesis. As a next step in pre-listening activity the teacher can write the key vocabulary on the chalkboard (or have printed handouts) so that students can be channeled into proper guesses as to

what the talk might be about. To create a mental scheme the following key vocabulary is given to students:

Savings behavior	Intertemporal choice
National saving rates	Hypothesis
Wealth of nations	Structure of languages
Conscious investors	Futured languages
Open markets	Futureless language speakers
GDP growth	Time preference

Keywords need not necessarily be unfamiliar vocabulary but should provide guidance to the subsequent discourse that students will hear. The latter then brainstorm their ideas bearing in mind that the talk centres on a certain hypothesis connecting languages and economic behavior. This part of the pre-listening activity is the most intriguing one.

Another alternative for a pre-listening task is to provide some of the paragraph openers or topic sentences of the talk and allow students to make guesses. The following sentences may be used:

1. Now, many brilliant economists have spent their entire lives working on this question, and as a field we've made a tremendous amount of headway and we understand a lot about this.
2. Now that we see these huge differences in savings rates, how is it possible that language might have something to do with these differences?
3. Now, that fascinated me endlessly as a child, but what fascinates me even more today as an economist is that some of these same differences carry through to how languages speak about time.
4. Is this difference in languages only between very, very distantly related languages, like English and Chinese?
5. This led me, as a behavioral economist, to an intriguing hypothesis.
6. Now while these findings are suggestive, countries can be different in so many different ways that it's very, very difficult sometimes to account for all of these possible differences.
7. What are the characteristics we can control for?
8. Now even after all of this granular level of control, do futureless language speakers seem to save more?
9. Can we push this data even further?

All the above-mentioned activities are really challenging. They contribute to creating a positive classroom environment and set students in a proper mood for actual listening. Before starting a while-listening activity the teacher states the purpose of listening which in graduate classes is listening to the gist. In this talk

students should specifically listen to 1) the proposed hypothesis, and 2) the arguments in support of the hypothesis. Students are advised to take notes as they listen to the talk. They should be warned that they will watch the video only once. As a starting point for post-listening activities work in small groups is encouraged, students share their understanding of the talk and clarify any difficult points. Small group discussions stimulate oral practice and develop cooperative skills. Furthermore, small group work is helpful as it decreases anxiety and provides opportunities to rehearse what is afterwards going to be said in front of the whole class. For a follow-up, students present their ideas as a class, exchange points of view. Further activities may include the use of transcripts of the talk, e.g., reordering of scrambled paragraphs, matching topic sentences with the paragraphs, finding discourse markers /coherence devices in a paragraph (or paragraphs).

As mentioned above, Chen's talk is based on research findings that were subsequently published in *American Economic Review*, hence, it is possible to bring students' attention to and assist them in identifying differences between written and spoken discourse by comparing samples from Chen's research article and the transcribed spoken text of his talk. The following extracts can be considered:

*Extract 1* (from M. K. Chen's paper)

In this paper I test a linguistic-savings hypothesis: that being required to speak in a distinct way about future events leads speakers to take fewer future-oriented actions. This hypothesis arises naturally if grammatically separating the future and the present leads speakers to disassociate the future from the present. This would make the future feel more distant, and since saving involves current costs for future rewards, would make saving harder. On the other hand, some languages grammatically equate the present and future. Those speakers would be more willing to save for a future which appears closer. Put another way, I ask whether a habit of speech which disassociates the future from the present, can cause people to devalue future rewards. The bulk of this paper investigates whether this prediction is borne out in savings behavior.

*Extract 2* (from M. K. Chen's transcribed talk)

This led me, as a behavioral economist, to an intriguing hypothesis. Could how you speak about time, could how your language forces you to think about time, affect your propensity to behave across time? You speak English, a futered language. And what that means is that every time you discuss the future, or any kind of a future event, grammatically you're forced to cleave that from the present and treat it as if it's something viscerally different. Now suppose that that visceral difference makes you subtly dissociate the future from the present every time you speak. If that's true and it makes the future feel like something more distant and more different from the present, that's going to make it harder to save. If, on the other hand, you speak a futureless language, the present and the future, you speak about them identically. If

that subtly nudges you to feel about them identically, that's going to make it easier to save.

These two texts basically convey the same information. Students are asked to comment on the linguistic differences of the extracts. They may mention differences in grammatical intricacy. Extract 1 is structurally more complex, whereas Extract 2 employs short and simple sentences. In Extract 1 lexical density is apparent: content words prevail over function words whereas in Extract 2 content words tend to be scattered over a number of clauses. The choice of words is more precise in Extract 1. Another difference that students notice is that Extract 2 is incomplete, less organized and contains more repetition and redundancy. This activity can be further extended by looking more closely and deeply at spoken versus written discourse features which will increase students' awareness about the conventions of academic English.

The above presented sequence consisting of pre-listening, while-listening, and post-listening illustrate activities that link bottom-up and top-down listening /see Richards, 2008: 10/ [2]. It should be mentioned that at high levels of proficiency learners are predominantly involved in top-down listening process.

Both pre- and post-listening activities should be kept to a minimum not to cause boredom. Also, with each TED talk different materials may be devised to maintain student interest. Another factor to consider in material development is focusing on task-based activities so that students listen and engage in using the language rather than answering questions. To sum up, teachers should select interesting and relevant topics, define the purpose for listening and design tasks that suit the particular talk. In addition to enhancing listening skills, TED talks can be used for other purposes, too. For example, they provide excellent observation material for teaching public speaking and presentation skills.

TED talks add variety and contribute to shaping audiovisual culture in the classroom. Like other visual media, TED talks produce authentic learning opportunities, stimulate learner autonomy and aid student-centred instruction. One advantage of TED talks over listening tasks in a textbook is that talks are longer so the students are exposed to actually more listening time *per se*. They are an invaluable resource for improving listening skills as well as other subskills like note-taking, summarizing and discussion strategies. TED talks have a favourable impact on the learning environment in a classroom by stimulating creativity, developing positive interests, attitudes and values for effective learning. All the mentioned features make the use of TED talks an exceptional learning tool. TED talks help widen the audiovisual repertoire and cater to various needs of students. Carefully chosen materials linking the content of the talk to the speciality content may be further incorporated into an EAP/ESP course curriculum.

## NOTES

1. One long-standing claim concerning the relationship between language and culture is that the structure of a language determines the way in which the speakers of that language view the world. This claim is most usually associated with the American linguist Edward Sapir (1881-1939) and his student Benjamin Lee Whorf (1897-1941). The claim today is referred to as: *the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, the Whorfian hypothesis, linguistic relativity, or linguistic determinism*. The Whorfian hypothesis has been attacked and severely criticized for over 70 years resulting in a broad consensus among linguists that if our mother-tongue influences the way we think at all, any such influence is negligible and trivial. But in the last few years, “new research has revealed that when we learn our mother tongue, we do after all acquire certain habits of thought that shape our experience in significant and often surprising ways” /Deutscher, 2010: 2/. (G. Deutscher. Does Your Language Shape How You Think? // *New York Times*. <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/29/magazine/29language>).

2. Research indicates that “two different kinds of processes are involved in understanding spoken discourse. These are often referred to as *bottom-up* and *top-down* processing. Bottom-up processing refers to using the incoming input as the basis for understanding the message. Comprehension begins with the received data that is analyzed as successive levels of organization – sounds, words, clauses, sentences, texts – until meaning is derived. Comprehension is viewed as a process of decoding. The listener’s lexical and grammatical competence in a language provides the basis for bottom-up processing. The input is scanned for familiar words, and grammatical knowledge is used to work out the relationship between elements of sentences. Top-down processing, on the other hand, refers to the use of background knowledge in understanding the meaning of a message. Whereas bottom-up processing goes from language to meaning, top-down processing goes from meaning to language. The background knowledge required for top-down processing may be previous knowledge about the topic of discourse, situational or contextual knowledge, or knowledge in the form of “schemata” or “scripts” – plans about the overall structure of events and the relationships between them” /Richards, 2008: 11/.

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**Լ. ՀՈՎԱԿԻՄՅԱՆ – TED դասախոսությունները որպես լսել-ընկալելու հմտությունները զարգացնելու միջոց.** – Սույն հոդվածը դիտարկում է ուսուցման պրոցեսում լատենտական նյութերի, մասնավորապես TED դասախոսությունների կիրառումը որպես լսել-ընկալելու հմտությունները զարգացնելու արդյունավետ միջոց: Տվյալ դասախոսությունների շարքը ուսանողներին թույլ է տալիս գործնականում ընդլայնել իրենց ուսումնառության փորձառությունը բնական խոսքային համատեքստերում: Թեմաների բազմազանությունը հնարավորություն է տալիս դասավանդողներին TED դասախոսությունները ինտեգրել ԱԱՆ (Անգլերենը ակադեմիական նպատակների համար) և ԱՀՆ (Անգլերենը հատուկ նպատակների համար) ծրագրերում զուգակցելով մասնագիտական բովանդակությունը դասընթացի բովանդակության հետ: Հոդվածում առաջարկվում են լսարանում TED դասախոսությունների գործնական կիրառման եղանակներ:

**Բանալի բառեր:** TED դասախոսություններ, լսել-ընկալել, նախաունկողման, բուն ունկողման և ետունկողման փուլերի աշխատանք-հանձնարարություններ, լսելու ռազմավարություններ, անգլերենը ակադեմիական նպատակների համար, անգլերենը հատուկ նպատակների համար, ուսուցման բարձր մակարդակ

**Л. ОВАКИМЯН – TED лекции как средство развития навыков аудирования.** – Статья посвящена обсуждению использования аудиовизуальных средств, в частности **TED** лекций как инструмента развития совершенствования навыков аудирования. Подчеркивается роль аудирования в изучении языка в аутентичных контекстах. Рассматриваются потенциал и преимущества использования TED лекций в преподавании. Разнообразие тем позволяет преподавателям интегрировать лекции в программы по английскому для академических/специальных целей. Статья содержит рекомендации по использованию TED лекций на основе практического опыта их применения.

**Ключевые слова:** TED лекции, аудирование, предтекстовые/ предпросмотровые, притекстовые/ припросмотровые, послетекстовые/ послепросмотровые задания, стратегии аудирования, английский для академических целей, английский для специальных целей, продвинутый уровень обучения