TED TALKS, LIBERAL ARTS, AND THE SECOND LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

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Introduction

Put quite simply, the goal of a liberal arts education is to teach people how to think, or as John Henry Newman (2007) put it, “To open the mind, to correct it, to refine it, to enable it to know, and to digest, master, rule and use its knowledge, to give power over its own faculties, application, flexibility, method, (and) critical exactness” (n.p.). Some of the more specific goals of liberal arts include developing critical thinkers, independent learners, and problem solvers, as well as to encourage people to be global citizens with broad perspectives (Wadden et al., 2012).

TED Talks are video-taped lectures that are available for viewing on the internet free of charge. Ted Talks began as a conference where Technology Entertainment and Design (hence TED) came together under one roof. Since then TED has evolved into numerous TED conferences every year that feature topics covering nearly every field imaginable and speakers from incredibly diverse backgrounds. The stated mission of TED is to bring together “people from every discipline and culture who seek a deeper understanding of the world. We believe passionately in the power of ideas to change attitudes, lives and, ultimately, the world.” (Ted, 2014). A major common feature of TED Talks is their brevity. As a rule TED Talks are 20 minutes or less in length. In addition, most TED Talks have an interactive transcript that allows the viewer to stop and start the Ted Talk at any point. These transcripts are often available in many different languages, as are the subtitles.

When developing materials for the ESL classroom it often is ultimately up to the classroom teacher to decide what principles to follow (Tomlinson, 2003). One of the most common accepted ways of teaching
English as a second language is to follow the communicative language model. At its essence, this means to teach not only about the language, but also how to use it. In developing this course, elements from liberal arts and sound English teaching practice were the main guiding factors. As for liberal arts, using TED Talks matches up particularly well with the goals of giving students a broad perspective, encouraging critical thinking, and introducing students to the idea of being global citizens. The major guiding principles from a TESL standpoint were the importance of using authentic materials that are motivating (Bacon & Finneman, 1990; Kuo, 1993), as well as giving students input that they can use on their own and in a variety of layers (Parish, 1995). For example, learners can watch TED Talks any time they have access to the internet. In addition, they have not only the option to watch with or without subtitles (with subtitles in English or Japanese), but they also they have access to transcripts in both English and Japanese.

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to measure the perceptions of ESL students and teachers at a liberal arts university in regard to a course based on TED Talks.

The Course

This course was designed for a ten-week class that met twice a week. The three themes used to select the TED Talks were education, bioethics, and the future. The first day of each week’s classes was basically a comprehension day. Class would begin with a check of vocabulary that the instructors had identified as possibly difficult for the students. The instructor would give the students a list of the words and have them try to define the words in small groups or with a partner. After this, the teacher would then go over the words with the students in large group, confirming, clarifying, and giving examples as needed.
example of a typical vocabulary list, see Appendix A.

After this, the instructor would have the students try to predict what the video might be about based on the vocabulary words, and then the class would watch the video together. Next, the students would be given teacher-generated comprehension questions. These questions typically were quite general questions with the aim to steer the students to identify the speaker’s thesis, main points, and support. The students would discuss these questions in a small group. After a short discussion, the class would then watch the video together once more, and then again try to answer the comprehension questions in their same small groups. When the students were finished, the class would go over these questions as a whole, with the teacher correcting and answering questions as needed. For an example of typical comprehension questions, see Appendix B.

At this point, if time allowed, students would be shuffled into new groups. They would then spend the remainder of class trying to generate reaction questions about the TED Talk. The homework for next class consisted of each student bringing five possible discussion questions to the next session. Students were also encouraged to watch the video again if they felt they needed to.

The second day of each week’s class was basically a discussion and reaction day. Each class would begin with a review of some of the vocabulary words that the teachers felt were particularly important or useful. These words were put into questions by the teacher. The teacher would distribute these questions to the students. The students would then ask a classmate one of these questions and then try to write down the classmate’s response. These written responses needed to use the vocabulary correctly, include the partner’s name, and be written in a full, grammatically correct sentence. The students could only ask one partner one question and then they had to find a new partner. After this activity, the teacher would collect the students’ papers and correct any mistakes and return the papers to the students during the next class. For an example of typical vocabulary questions, see Appendix C.

When the students had finished the vocabulary activity, they were put into groups and given time to share, compare, and further develop their discussion questions. After this, they were put into new groups
and then they would discuss these self-generated questions. In addition, the instructor would put teacher-generated questions on the board or overhead camera for students to discuss if they had time. The last portion of class would then be used to further discuss reaction questions in a large group. For an example of typical teacher-generated reaction questions, see Appendix D.

This process was followed for six weeks. For the last four weeks, the students worked in groups and led the class by selecting their own video and taking over the role of the teacher described above. Of course, in cases where students got stuck or made mistakes, the teacher would step in and help. The students were free to select videos on any topic, but the teacher had to approve it.

Results

The students in this study were made up of 58 students who had a paper based TOEFL average of 504 with a range of 543 down to 457. These students were first-year students enrolled in a liberal arts university. At the end of the term, as a program-wide policy, all courses were evaluated by the students by answering the following question using the following rubric:

Please evaluate the usefulness, value, and quality of this course.

4= Very Good  3=Good  2=Poor  1=Very Poor

The mean of the students’ responses to the above question for both the instructors who followed the course flow outlined above and also for other instructors who also used TED Talks but followed a different structure are shown in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1. Student’s Overall Satisfaction</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Instructors following this course flow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructors not following this course flow</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In addition, the students were given a questionnaire with both ranking and open-ended questions that had been developed by the instructors of this course (Appendix E). The students used the following scale for their responses:

4= Very Good          3=Good          2=Poor          1=Very Poor

Table 2 shows the results of the questionnaire.

Table 2. Students’ Perceptions of Activities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questionnaire Item</th>
<th>Mean (N=58)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. How useful was the vocabulary check before viewing the TED Talk?</td>
<td>3.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. How useful were the comprehension questions the teacher gave you?</td>
<td>3.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. How useful were the first small group comprehension discussions?</td>
<td>3.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. How useful were the second small group comprehension discussions?</td>
<td>3.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. How useful were the large group comprehension discussions?</td>
<td>3.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. How useful was the vocabulary activity?</td>
<td>3.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. How useful was it making your own reaction questions?</td>
<td>3.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. How useful were the reaction questions made by the teacher?</td>
<td>3.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. How useful were the small group reaction discussions?</td>
<td>3.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. How useful were the large group reaction discussions?</td>
<td>3.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. How useful was it doing your group project?</td>
<td>3.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. How useful was it participating in other students projects?</td>
<td>3.82</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The following section lists the open-ended questions and some typical student responses, with the grammar somewhat cleaned up.

1. What was not helpful or what would you change about this course?
   - We should use other videos in addition to TED Talks.
   - Using the same pattern every class can sometimes be boring.
   - I was not interested in some of the videos. One was too long.
   - Maybe we could watch one video each class.
   - The videos were interesting but students will like videos about love, not scientific ones.

2. Please explain what you thought about the vocabulary activity we did on Fridays.
   - It was a good review. I forgot some words from last class.
   - I am not used to the words, so the practice was helpful.
   - I came to be able to remember the words more clearly.
   - It was good because we could confirm the meaning and use of the words we learned.
   - I think it is very interesting and the best way to learn new vocabulary.
   - It was somewhat useful but I do not remember the vocabulary well.
   - It is useful because I can confirm my memory and it is hard to forget if I use the word.

3. Do you have any other comments?
   - Watching the lecture twice in class and hearing teacher’s explanation was so helpful.
   - This class gave me opportunities to watch good English speeches and debate different ideas with others.
   - Videos were interesting. Also, the level and length of video was appropriate.
   - This helps us understand another class in university. I found related lectures and watched those.
   - It was good for me to listen to many people’s stories. Those stories were impressive and made me think about the issue which they talk about.
   - It is good that we can discuss just after watching video. We can discuss when we have new impression.
   - It was fun to try disagree with the speaker.
Finally, after each TED Talk, the students were asked to rate the lecture for difficulty level and interest level. They were asked to do this for both the videos that the teacher had selected and for the videos the student groups had selected for their projects. They did not rate the videos that were selected by their own group. They used the following scale:

**Difficulty Level**
1 = Too difficult  
2 = A little difficult, but appropriate  
3 = A little easy, but appropriate  
4 = Too easy  

**Interest Level**
1 = Very interesting  
2 = Somewhat interesting  
3 = Somewhat uninteresting  
4 = Very uninteresting

Table 3 displays the results.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Video/Length</th>
<th>Difficulty Level</th>
<th>Interest Level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Patricia Ryan: Don’t insist on English/10:35 (teacher’s selection)</td>
<td>2.50</td>
<td>1.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karen Armstrong: Let’s revive the golden rule/9:54 (teacher’s selection)</td>
<td>2.32</td>
<td>1.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paul Wolpe: It’s time to question bioengineering/19:42 (teacher’s selection)</td>
<td>2.07</td>
<td>1.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neil Harbisson: I listen to color/9:35 (teacher’s selection)</td>
<td>2.50</td>
<td>1.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ian Goldin: Navigating our global future/7:06 (teacher’s selection)</td>
<td>2.21</td>
<td>2.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hans Rosling: Global population growth box by box/10:04 (teacher’s selection)</td>
<td>2.67</td>
<td>1.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jay Walker: The world’s English mania/4:34 (students’ selection)</td>
<td>3.20</td>
<td>1.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blaise Aguera y Arcas: Augmented-reality maps/7:45 (students’ selection)</td>
<td>2.06</td>
<td>1.53</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
First of all, a few possible implications can be inferred from the results in Table 1. One is that the students in the class following this course flow were quite satisfied with this course. Indeed, something the averages do not show is that 37 of the 58 students marked the course as ‘very good’, while the remaining 21 of the 58 students marked the course as ‘good’. This means that not even one student found the course to be ‘poor’ or ‘very poor’. Another possible implication which can be drawn from comparing the instructors who did not follow this course flow to those who did is that simply using TED Talks in the class will not guarantee success. Unfortunately, it is not clear what system the teachers in the other courses followed, but the difference between the two as far as student satisfaction is clear.

The results from the questionnaire in Table 2 show that the students found the specific activities to be quite helpful. From these results and observations in the class, it certainly seemed that the time spent in the small group discussions were especially useful. It is notable that item seven, which is about students writing their own questions, received the lowest ranking. It was observed in class that the students initially had a difficult time making questions, and often would make questions that were closer to comprehension questions rather than reaction questions. In addition, initially students tended to place greater importance on the reaction questions that the teacher made in comparison to the questions made by peers. They were observed either racing through the peer questions or beginning with the teacher’s questions and discussing the
peer questions only if they had time at the end. In subsequent classes it has proven helpful to model good reaction questions, to spend class time explicitly developing them, and to point out especially appropriate reaction questions that the students generate.

As for the open-ended comments, some of them indicate that the use of TED Talks are indeed fulfilling some of the goals of liberal arts. For example, the student comment about this class being useful in other classes indicates that students might be making connections between their classes and not just treating each class as a discrete entity. Seeing the connections between things and going beyond the classroom and watching videos on their own is a sign that independent learning, a central tenet of liberal arts, is being fostered. Also, the comments about the discussions (as well as teacher observation) confirmed that the students were engaging in critical thinking and debate and discussion of ideas, another cornerstone of liberal arts.

In addition, the comments about what could be changed about the class are a good reminder that, while this course flow appeared to be successful from the perspective of student satisfaction (and teacher observations), there are certainly other variations that could be equally as good, if not better. Certainly time is one factor. For example, using shorter lectures could allow for the course flow mentioned above to possibly be collapsed into one day, as one student seemed to suggest.

Looking at the results from Table 3, it seems that the instructors and students alike were mostly able to pick videos at the right difficulty level, with the teachers tending to pick slightly more difficult videos. Upon closer inspection, however, two of the student videos were perhaps too easy to be of use for improving the students’ English. This underscores the importance of carefully reviewing the students’ videos before approving them. The interest level ratings also appear to be quite good. The one exception was the Goldin video. The students were asked about this and they complained that unlike the other lectures, they found this one was too general and not focused or specific enough.

One final point that some students mentioned and was also observed by the instructors in this and subsequent classes has to do with the video length. Videos that are around ten minutes or shorter seem to be about
right. Videos that are longer tend to lose the students’ attention, and indeed put some to sleep. This is backed up by Medina’s (2011) findings that 10 minutes is the amount of time you can expect to keep people’s attention, after which you need to take a break or you will lose your audience.

Conclusion

From the perspective of the students and instructors involved in this course, the use of TED Talks certainly seemed to be effective in helping the learners with both their English skills and the goals of liberal arts. Of course, there are many variations to the class flow described in this paper, and with the ongoing production of TED Talks, exploring these in the future should be a wonderful resource for the classroom teacher.

References


Appendix A
Vocabulary for Ian Golding
Look at these words in your group and define the words that you know.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word</th>
<th>Word</th>
<th>Word</th>
<th>Word</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>pundits</td>
<td>urbanization</td>
<td>integration</td>
<td>renaissance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>life expectancy</td>
<td>illiteracy</td>
<td>unleashing</td>
<td>innovation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>underbelly</td>
<td>Achilles’ heel</td>
<td>systemic</td>
<td>virulent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>resilience</td>
<td>miniaturization</td>
<td>regenerative</td>
<td>xenophobic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>interweaving</td>
<td>pandemics</td>
<td>downfall</td>
<td>wreck</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fossilized</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Appendix B
Comprehension Questions for Goldin
1. What is the main idea of this talk?
2. What are two Achilles’ heels of globalization?
3. What is driving the rapid change in the future (2 things)?
4. What are the important things people need to consider about the future (5 things)?

Appendix C
Vocabulary Questions for Goldin
1. Ask someone what s/he thinks will be Japan’s life expectancy in 100 years.
2. Ask someone what s/he thinks is the underbelly of Japan.
3. Ask someone what is her/his Achilles’ heel.
4. Ask someone about what s/he thinks could be the downfall of humanity.
5. Ask someone about the last time s/he wrecked something.

Appendix D
Reaction Questions for Goldin
1. Do you think Japan’s government is fossilized? World governments?
2. Overall do you think globalization is good or bad?
3. Are you worried about any systemic risks?
4. Overall, is urbanization a good or bad thing?
5. Do you think technical innovations are moving too fast?
6. Do you agree with Goldin’s ideas about what we need to consider?
7. Are you optimistic or pessimistic about the future?
Appendix E
Questionnaire

Please answer the following questions.

1. How useful was the vocabulary check before viewing the TED Talk?
   4= Very Good  3=Good  2=Poor  1=Very Poor

2. How useful were the comprehension questions the teacher gave you?
   4= Very Good  3=Good  2=Poor  1=Very Poor

3. How useful were the first small group comprehension discussions?
   4= Very Good  3=Good  2=Poor  1=Very Poor

4. How useful were the second small group comprehension discussions?
   4= Very Good  3=Good  2=Poor  1=Very Poor

5. How useful were the large group comprehension discussions?
   4= Very Good  3=Good  2=Poor  1=Very Poor

6. How useful was the vocabulary activity?
   4= Very Good  3=Good  2=Poor  1=Very Poor

7. How useful was it making your own reaction questions?
   4= Very Good  3=Good  2=Poor  1=Very Poor

8. How useful were the reaction questions made by the teacher?
   4= Very Good  3=Good  2=Poor  1=Very Poor

9. How useful were the small group reaction discussions?
   4= Very Good  3=Good  2=Poor  1=Very Poor

10. How useful were the large group reaction discussions?
    4= Very Good  3=Good  2=Poor  1=Very Poor

11. How useful was it doing your group project?
    4= Very Good  3=Good  2=Poor  1=Very Poor

12. How useful was it participating in other students projects?
    4= Very Good  3=Good  2=Poor  1=Very Poor

1. What was not helpful or what would you change about this course?

2. Please explain what you thought about the vocabulary activity we did on
   Fridays.

3. Do you have any other comments?