Enabling Criticality: A Top-down Bottom-up Approach to Using TED Talks in EAP Listening Classes

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Abstract

The use of TED talks in EAP has gained popularity in recent years and they are promoted through coursebooks as a means of simultaneously developing listening and critical thinking skills. However, a traditional comprehension approach to teaching listening; one that focuses on testing lower-order thinking skills through discrete questions may be inadequate as a gateway into a critical consideration of broader issues for second language learners. With the practical purpose of developing a teaching approach to using TED talks informed by current theory, the chapter begins with a consideration of how critical thinking processes and top-down and bottom-up listening processes can be integrated into a singular model. Based on this framework, a genre analysis of the TED talk is made by taking a learner's perspective in order to identify cognitive and affective barriers to listening that may restrict opportunities for critical thinking. In the discussion that follows, five activities are suggested for use with TED talks in listening classes that support top-down and bottom-up listening processes, and which set students up to analyse and evaluate the thesis and underlying structure of a TED talk,

providing a solid foundation from which to approach discussion topics critically and reflectively.

Keywords: Critical thinking, English for academic purposes, second language listening, TED talks

Introduction

The use of TED talks has found popularity in university EAP classes, chiefly as a means of developing academic listening skills. Due to ease of access, their appropriate length, a large array of stimulating topics, clear diction, visual engagement, and the ability to replay sections or view subtitles and transcripts in multiple languages across platforms, they can be easily adapted to numerous teaching contexts. Their potential as part of an autonomous, experiential and social, modern learning experience (Owens & Kadakia, 2016) extends their appeal beyond the convenience afforded by their ready availability. They are a distinct type of presentation, and arguably an emergent genre in their own right; one which blends "the sales pitch, the memoir, and the academic lecture" (Ludewig, 2017, p.1). Compared with traditional university lectures, TED talks have been shown to have lower Academic Vocabulary List (AVL) representation (Wingrove, 2017). This pseudo-academic tenor helps to make academic topics accessible and appealing, and several coursebooks[1] adapt TED talks and promote them in the EAP context as an authentic means of providing listening input while developing critical thinking skills needed to engage with current, real-world discussion topics.

Yet certain issues arise from linking listening with critical thinking and discussion, for without denying that TED speakers are 'authentic' or 'natural' in their language use, their talks are at the same time: "highly prepared, perfectly delivered oral performances"

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[1] For example, the '21st Century Reading' series' published by National Geographic Learning (Blass et al., 2016).

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arguments to the thesis can you think of?"; or "Was there anything important to consider that the speaker did not talk about?" These are questions that challenge students in core critical thinking markers of breadth, depth of thought, and intellectual accuracy (Facione & Gittens, 2016, pp.321-322; Fisher, 2011, pp. 60, 84–86; Halpern, 2014, pp. 246-256). Speaking activities can also be planned around similar discussion prompts.

Conclusion

In this chapter we presented an integrated model employing top-down and bottom-up listening, and critical thinking processes. We conceptualised and analysed TED talks as a genre to demonstrate one way to support learners in the listening classroom environment. Indeed, a need for empirical work exploring our proposed framework through investigations of the challenges faced by learners in critically approaching TED talks may shed light on the efficacy of our suggested teaching interventions. In presenting these five teaching activities, we have highlighted how they can merge the linguistic goal of helping learners to better understand TED talks with furthering critical thinking development. The two processes need not be differentiated in the classroom, and rather than 'tacking on' critical thinking activities to the end of a language lesson, it can be involved throughout top-down and bottom-up listening activities, as it is inherently involved in these listening processes. By planning the listening component of lessons around top-down and bottom-up, learners can be better prepared to discuss the broader issues.

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