

Technology for EFL Learners: TED Talks as Technology Resources in Learning English Voice and Accent

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Abstract:

Problems that often arise in teaching English voice and Accent are limited material and references used. The integration of ICTs in EFL learning offers some tools to learn English voice and accent. One of them is TED Talks. TED Talks is a website and a downloaded application where the video is shared in which you can see a wide variety of English speakers in many parts of around the world speaking. This study aims to reveal students' ability in analysing English Accents during the implementation of TED Talks video and the students' response regarding the implementation of TED Talks video in learning voice and accents. In this action research, we propose a reflection on the incidence of TED talks on the teaching and learning of voice and accents. The instruments used to collect data were interviews, questionnaires, and teacher journals. The results of this study indicated that the students' ability in analysing English voice and accents were improved. They enable to differentiate several of English accents. Moreover, they also have better understanding related to the message conveyed from the video they watched. Besides, the students gave positive responses to the implementation of TED Talks video. Most of them mentioned that TED Talks video helps them to comprehend English voice and accents better. Thus, TED talks prove to be a useful material for English teaching as a foreign language considering that they assemble many characteristics that catch students' attention and get them related with the language spoken in actual contexts.

Keywords: Action Research, Pronunciation, TED Talks, Voice and Accents .

Introduction

Pronunciation is an action of saying a word; utterance, how to speak a word, especially the way that is generally accepted or understood, and the graphical representation of the way a word is pronounced, using the phonetic symbol (García, 2007; Flor et al., 2006; Gilakjani, 2016). Also, Cook (1996) as cited in Gilakjani (2016) defined pronunciation as the production of English sounds. Pronunciation is learned by repeating sounds and correcting them when produced inaccurately. When learners start learning pronunciation they make new habits and overcome the difficulties resulting from the first language. Nowadays, the development of ICT effects on teaching and learning language, especially in learning pronunciation. The teacher or lecturer must rethink strategies, tools, and methodologies that are being used to teach pronunciation in this technology era. One of the important aspects of pronunciation is voice and accents. The issue of voice and accents is significant in the EFL context, especially in learning pronunciation where teachers are the non-native speaker. An accent is a process by which a speaker substitutes a sound from their native language for a sound from English. Given that accent can be easily perceived during oral communication, it plays a crucial role in language learning.

Therefore, it is one of the significant features of language usage. Lippi-Green (1993) as cited in Galbat and Sa'adi (2018) defines accent as a no-tight set of prosodic and segmental qualities distributed over geographic and or social space. A variety of features at different levels make up this construct (e.g. segmental features such the phonological arrangement of vowels and consonants, namely, pronunciation, prosodic features including tempo, stress, pitch, and tempo). As far as non-native speakers are concerned, accent refers to the break-down of the phonology of the native language into the L2.

Based on the results of observations made by researchers in English education study programs, students still encounter difficulties in English pronunciation. Pronunciation represents one component that supports speaking skills. Lecturers also have obstacles in teaching pronunciation. Problems that often arise are limited material and references used. Lecturers often use or provide material obtained from the internet or related books. Activities that are often carried out are to provide students a word or sentence and ask them to make a phonetic symbol and recite it. Teaching pronunciation is teaching about aspects that influence the meaning of sentences through segmental phonemes. This is very important because pronunciation is a basic skill in speaking. Therefore, good pronunciation avoids misunderstandings in communication. Besides, the obstacles faced by students are lack of understanding of accents in English. They only understand English pronunciation using American accents. When lecturer gives an example of the video with a different accent, they have difficulty in understanding the meaning delivered by the speakers.

Learning English that supported by teaching media such as audiovisuals will make it easy for students to learn and make students interested. Lecturers should be a good model for students, if not; they will imitate wrong pronunciation and make mistakes. Lecturers must produce accurate sounds and their sound production to students to make students truly understand how the correct pronunciation is produced. Harmer (2000) states that concentrating on sound, showing where they are made in the mouth, makes students aware of where words should be emphasized - all things give them additional information about spoken English and help them achieve the goal of increasing understanding and clarity.

The purposes of this study were (1) to reveal students' ability in analyzing English Accents during the implementation of TED Talks Video and (2) to reveal the students' response regarding the implementation of TED Talks video in learning voice and accents. This study is expected to give some understanding of the students' perceptibility in the different English accents and their perceived ease of comprehending them. It also, hopefully, gives a broader view concerning English accents particularly for those who are involved in teaching English as a foreign language.

Regarding the problems described above, a solution is needed to facilitate students to improve their abilities in analyzing different accent in learning pronunciation. In this case, one of the obstacles faced by lecturers and students is limited media. Therefore, researchers want to use TED Talks Video Program to improve understanding of English voice and accents. There are plenty of resources or digital platforms where we can find authentic videos that could help us to provide the students with the means to communicate using English; however, it is worthy to clarify that our interest in TED is because of its feature that brings the conference's transcription besides the characteristic that every video has its subtitles that are not auto-generated as it happens with many videos on YouTube, for instance.

Maria, Junior, and Astrid (2016) on their research entitled "TED Talks as an ICT tool to promote Communicative skill in EFL Students" stated that TED talks prove to be a useful material for English teaching as a foreign language considering that they assemble many characteristics that catch students' attention and get them related with the language spoken in actual contexts. One of the main points made when using TED talks is that students are not just listening to the speaker, that is what would happen in a recording, but they are watching the speaker's movements and facial expressions that permit the students to gather much more information about the speech and include it in their repertoire to use it in future occasions. Another aspect to remark is the accuracy of TED subtitles that, additionally, give more information to the students about what they are listening, as well as let the students gather much more words, meaning vocabulary than they would catch if just listening.

In line with the important of accent in learning pronunciation, Galbat and Sa'adi (2018) on their research entitled "Iranian EFL Teachers' Perceptions of Learning Accent" argued the issue of foreign accent has been the focus of many researchers and many teachers attempted to sound as native-like as possible to better teach native English accent. The present study attempted to uncover the Iranian EFL teachers' perceptions of accent, the way they viewed their accent, and how English accent can be improved. Based on the analysis performed on the data collected through questionnaires and interviews, it was found that teachers care about learning accent and they considered it valuable and important. They admitted that they have a foreign accent to some degree and they did not seem to be happy with a foreign accent and were more in favors of native-like accent. Regarding the strategies to improve English accent, they mentioned techniques like listening to authentic language, understanding pronunciation rules, and comparing people's accent with their accent, watching English movies, noticing stress, and pronunciation patterns, imitating, speaking with native people, using books, and recording and monitoring their speeches.

Research Method

The purposes of this study were to reveal out the use of TED Talks media can improve students' understanding Voice and Accents in learning Pronunciation and to reveal out the response of students about the implementation of TED Talks in learning pronunciation. To achieve these objectives, the research method used in this study was qualitative action research which is a methodology that includes action and research. McKay (2006) establishes that action research involves a systematic inquiry into the issues and problems that teachers face aiming to improve pedagogical practices. It is important to highlight that we do not only want to observe the phenomenon and try to understand it but also, as practitioners, we want to make a real immersion in the classroom through the implementation of certain activities that have been based on authentic videos of the digital platform TED, in order to reflect and improve our pedagogical practices; in this manner, as teachers concerned about the methodologies used in the classroom and its results as well as the problems that arise there, the action research method is the most suitable for responding to the research question that guides our study.

This study was carried out in English Education Study Program with 22 students from the second semester as the participants. The reason why the researcher chooses the participants was that they are learning pronunciation in that semester. There are many data collection instruments used in qualitative research, where each one has special characteristics to obtain diverse types and quantities of information. Considering the research question that we seek to answer we have chosen three methods of data collection for their accuracy. The instruments were the interview, questionnaire, and teacher journal. Data analysis was carried out after data were collected. The collected data were analysed to answer the research questions. To answer the first research question, data were obtained from the results of the pronunciation learning activities using the TED Talks Program media and interviews. The results of the interviews were transcribed and codified then categorized. Then, the data were categorized and interpreted based on the relevant theory. To answer the second question, data were collected through interviews. The results of the interviews were transcribed and codified then categorized. Then, the data were interpreted based on the relevant theory.

Result and Discussion

There are two issues covered in the analysis; 1) students' ability in analyzing English Accents during the implementation of TED Talks Video, and 2) Students' Responses regarding the application of TED Talks as a medium for learning pronunciation.

Students' ability in analyzing English Accents during the implementation of TED Talks Video TED

The implementation of this research was based on the principle of Task-Based Approach, namely pre-task, task cycle and language focus (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). In this research, the researchers implemented the activity into pre-watching, watching, and post-watching activities. For each activity, the researcher selected a TED talk according to the speaker's accent, the pace of speech and, video duration (no more than 8 minutes). There were four sessions in implementing TED Talks in learning English voice and accents. For each session, the researchers selected different accents from around the world. The researcher selected the videos from the United States, British, Southeast Asia, and India.

Pre-watching Activity

In the pre-watching the subject was introduced, students get prepared for what they were going to see, listen and do. Activities such as brainstorming, word-searching, and crosswords were carried out which supplied key vocabulary and activated previous knowledge. After this, the video was played. In the first session, the researcher selected TED Video entitled My philosophy for a happy life – Sam Berns. This video represents how American accents speak. The second TED video was from British speaker-Shopie Andrews entitled the best way to help is often just to listen. The third video was from middle east Asia entitled a Saudi, and Indian, and an Iranian walk into Qatari bar – Maz Jobrani. He spoke the Southeast Asian accent. And the last video was from South Asian (Indian, Pakistan, and Sri Langka) speaker.

Watching Activity

During the watching, the researchers asked the students to do some exercises such as taking notes of unknown words or words that summarize the conference. This activity was to develop where the language was used in oral and written form. The students after writing down important vocabulary from the TED talk did role-plays.

Post-watching Activity

In the post-watching activity, the researcher divided students into small groups, for example, after watching the video, in groups of 5-6 people, each group discussed what they watched, what accents that speaker used, how were the accents. The researchers were a facilitator when his/her help was needed, for the rest, the teachers were observers. Finally, in the post-task students presented their resolved task, they were role plays and debates.

Most of the students were aware of the English accent both American and British Accents. In the first session, when students analyzed TED video from American accents, they argued with the group that the speaker used the American accent. It can be seen from students observation related to unknown word and how the way the speaker speaks the word. After watching the video, each group was provided a chance to discuss with all members. The representative of each group presented the result of analyzing. There are three features of American accents that had been analyzed from all groups. First, the sound short-a (ə) like in word (family) is raised and diphthongized. Second, the sound -r is pronounced at the end of the word. Then, the sound (o) like in word lot is pronounced unrounded vowel. In the second session, the researcher played the TED video of the British accent. Similar to the first session, students must be analyzing the unknown word and taking note. Then they must discuss with a member of the group. The researcher tried to ask students comparing accent the video with the previous one. The result of the analysis, they explained that American and British accent have different feature. The sound-a is pronounced with broad-a like in the family. This differs from most American accents in which these words are pronounced with the short-a like in word cat. The other features were the sound –r at the end of words are not pronounced. And in the British accents, the vowels tend to be a bit more conservative than other accents.

The third session, the researchers played TED video of Middle East Accent. The result of the analysis found that in Middle East accent, the sound 'the' is pronounce /ze/ like in the man or the girl the sound seems like ze man, ze girl. And the sound of (ə) like in think is pronounced /se/. For example, I think seems I sink. The other feature was the sound of /p/ change with /b/ like in word 'police' sounded 'bolis'.

Then the sound –r is pronounced more roll than the other accent. In the fourth session, the researcher played the TED video of South Asian Accents. Based on the result of students' analysis, it found that in South Asian Accents, the sound –t (like in But) is pronounced not between teeth but in back of the tongue. And the sound in this accent sometimes beginning with b sound like in word of 'football' it sounds like 'bootball.' The intonation in south Asian is like a song. So when Indian people speak, they like singing. There is repetition in South Asian Accents. For example, the Indian usually repeat the word 'very' it seems very long.

Considering the result of the research that had been explained above, it can be concluded that using TED Talks video can increase students' ability in analyzing accents. Besides, the results of the questionnaire prove the effectiveness of TED Talks video. One of the students that answered the second questionnaire asserted that "In my opinion, the TED Talks are very good as a medium for pronunciation learning because there are many speakers from various parts of the world so that we can better understand voice and accent from various countries".

Students' Responses regarding the implementation of TED Talks as a medium for learning English Voice and Accents

The goal of teaching pronunciation for many EFL learners and the goal of these learners are to be understood in conversation but other learners wish to communicate with native speakers. According to Fraser (2000), learners should be able to speak English with their favorite accent which is easily understandable to an English speaker. Jenkins (2002) stated that learners need to be intelligible to both native and non-native speakers. Teachers should help learners become both intelligible and easy to understand. EFL learners cannot completely pronounce English words exactly like native speakers. The students' respond towards the use of TED Talks video can be seen from students' participation. In every cycle of implementation of TED Talks video, the researchers provided students to make a group and have some discussion related to the video watched. The use of TED Talks video makes students feel encouraged to speak. They showed more critical and reflexive thinking regarding different accents in part of the world. Students were more prone to comment on the different accent as well as they were more motivated in expressing what they were thinking, also, they were more open to sharing their ideas with others when they were analyzing accent in groups. Besides that, the result of questionnaire support that using TED Talks provided students to have a chance to speak up with others. On the other hand, the use of TED Talks can help students in understanding different accent in part of the world. This is supported by other students that claim in the questionnaire that "the use of TED Talks Video help in learning pronunciation especially in understanding different."

Students expressed that they felt more comfortable doing the activities proposed by the researchers. Students also remarked the fact that most of the themes in TED talks are socially and culturally relevant. The researchers pointed out this better in the attitude towards the activities in English based on the videos. They stressed the fact that when other activities used to be assigned, students were reluctant to do them; students were careless about what was going on in the English class; instead, when TED talks were presented students got their complete attention to understand what the speaker was saying and use the words caught to express what they were thinking.

Learners communicated with their partners using the words in the proper context and more confidently thanks to the vocabulary and the exposure to which they were subject. Besides, students claimed they felt more confident speaking since they already counted with the elements that allowed them to express their ideas, their feelings and, their standpoints regarding different accent. Students noticed that there are diverse ways to pronounce the language; therefore, it is not a reason to quit speaking. Some learners declared that they thought the only pronunciations to speak English was American and British and realizing that around the world there are singular ways to speak encourages doing so. According to one of the students, "learning pronunciation using TED Talks Video was good and helpful, because hearing people talk continuously like those accents, makes us follow the flow of voice and accent."

Conclusion

TED talks prove to be a useful material for English teaching as a foreign language considering that they assemble many characteristics that catch students' attention and get them related to the language spoken in actual contexts. One of the main points made when using TED talks is that students are not just listening to the speaker, that is what would happen in a recording, but they are watching the speaker's movements and facial expressions that permit the students to gather much more information about the

speech and include it in their repertoire to use it in future occasions. Also, the fact that the speakers in TED talks come from all around the world lets the students realize that learning English goes beyond doing a perfect pronunciation, but it also includes using the language to express ideas no matter if it is correct or no, perfection will come with the practice. At the first stages, the important thing is to try. This gets the students related with more pronunciations besides American and British which eventually will create confidence in the students because they will not pay as much attention as they would pay to the content of what they are saying. With this, we are not declaring that pronunciation is unimportant; we are trying to make the point that students should not be afraid of speaking just because they do not pronounce perfectly American or perfectly British. Additionally, socio-cultural topics contained in the TED talks add to the motivation and interest of the students to participate actively in the proposed activities. Something important to remark is that during the English class it is important to promote the use of the target language to the extent possible and using topics that concern the students is an effective way to do it. With this, the idea is to create an environment in which the students get related to the target language and doing so, create a path to learn it meaningfully. Creating such an environment is quite important because those few hours that the students are in English class is possibly the only time that they are in contact with the language.

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