

PROS AND CONS OF TED-BASED LISTENING INSTRUCTION FOR ENGLISH MAJORS IN CHINA: STUDENTS' INSIGHTS

Huang Jian

School of Foreign Studies

Central University of Finance and Economics, Beijing, China

E-mail: summerofhj@sina.com

APA Citation: Jian, H. (2015). Pros and cons of ted-based listening instruction for English majors in China: Students' insights. *Indonesian EFL Journal*, 1(1), 34-40

Received: 03-7-2014

Accepted: 27-08-2014

Published: 01-01-2015

Abstract: Listening is essential not only for successful communication of various kinds but also for effective language acquisition (Rivers, 1981; Wang, 2012). Unfortunately, in spite of its significance, listening instruction and relevant research has been downplayed because of difficulty of teaching listening and a wrong belief that listening competence can be acquired simply through exposure (Ren, 2011; Field, 2008). The limited research into the instruction has revealed that listening instruction follows the comprehension approach (CA) which reduces listening teaching to listening testing (Brown, 1990, Vandergrift & Goh, 2012). As a result, listening learners often fail to receive instruction on how to listen and gradually lose their motivation for listening learning. The study aims to change this situation by using Ted-based materials for listening instruction. Via both quantitative and qualitative analysis of the data collected, the study shows that Ted-based listening instruction helps students' all-around development in terms of language proficiency, critical thinking (CT), world knowledge and affects though improvement are desired in choice of text in terms of right difficulty, length and speaker features.

Keywords: *Listening instruction, material development, ted, student perspective.*

INTRODUCTION

The study partly arises out of the researcher's own discontent, as an instructor, with the existing widespread CA to listening instruction favoring simply informative genre of text and demanding lower cognitive skills such as memorizing and superficial understanding in answering multiple-choices questions. Teaching on materials of this sort, the teacher is actually working as a human machine player: play and check, turning listening learning into listening testing and making the learning process boring. To expand traditional content of listening programs, Field (2008) proposed that (1) we should introduce greater variety in the types of input offered to the L2 listener; (2) we should match the type of listening required of the listener in real communication. Development of Ted-based listening materials is a response to the proposals, especially in the context of listening class for English majors in their second year of listening. The ted-based material is

developed using the Text-Driven Approach (Tomlinson, 2003), which emphasized the importance of selecting relevant, meaningful and engaging texts to begin with and then developing engaging pre, while-and post-reading (or listening) stages.

Ted speech is chosen as the spoken text for listening because of its two merits as below.

It represents a new popular listening event among university students.

In addition to traditional listening events such as phone conversations, announcement instruction, News headlines News items Documentaries Interviews, English lessons Lectures, the popularity of Ted across the world has made it an important listening event or encounter among university students. What is more, it has become an important source of knowledge and ideas for university students in China. If the listening teaching is to mirror the real world listening situation, Ted speech can't be ignored.

It represents a "super-rich" text for listening instruction.

Each text genre has its distinctive function. TV ads are intended to be persuasive; English lessons Lectures instructional; News headlines, News items and Documentaries informative; Drama excerpts and Film clips entertaining. We'd like to call Ted super-rich text because, in addition to being persuasive, instructional, informative and entertaining, it can also be inspiring and impressive, carrying important educational value in terms of both language and content. Choosing Ted as the spoken text for listening instruction respond quite well to the listening instruction philosophy: we are not only learn to listen but also listen to learn (Liu & Miao, 2012; Rost, 2005): to enrich our mind and expand our world knowledge.

In this study, the students have been offered 26 ted speeches on different topics and of varying lengths from 5 minutes to 15minutes accompanied by different listening tasks over one year. The speeches have been chosen in the very beginning by the teacher with special attention given to students' interests, relevance to students' life, inspiring ideas for students. As the class goes on, choice of speeches also takes into consideration of students' feedback. In the second semester, based on students' suggestions, speeches are grouped under three topics: language, economics and technology (for details, see appendix 2). Also, materials not only refer to text but also to the task and activities developed around it (Brown , 1995 ; Mishan , 2005). To give a full play to the pedagogical value of the speech, a series of tasks has been designed for each speech (for details, see appendix 3).

This study focuses on three research questions:

1. How do students like Ted-based Listening Instruction?
2. What do students like about Ted-based Listening Instruction?
3. What do students dislike about Ted-based Listening Instruction?

METHOD

Participants

38 Students of English majors (hereafter referred to as S1-S38 when quoted) have participated in the instruction and study. They are from English Department, School of Foreign Studies, Central University of Finance and Economics. They are in their second year of university study, having taking one year of listening course offered by another teacher. According to the students and the teacher, the materials used for the first yea is based on VOA and BBC news, with the first semester mainly on special English and second semester on Standard English. The teacher is an excellent teacher. The students have one-year experience of good listening instruction based on News and they will be exposed mainly to Ted as listening material in their second year.

Data collection instrument

Ted speech attitude questionnaire

In order to understand students' general attitude toward Ted-based listening instruction, students are asked to fill in a simple questionnaire (see appendix 1). The students are encouraged to give their true attitude and told that the results will be used only for research purpose and improvement of the listening course.

Student course feedback (report)

In order to understand what students like and dislike about Ted-based listening instruction, students are asked to write a report of around 500 hundred words on how they like Ted based listening instruction and the reasons behind their perception. The requirement is to be both thinking and honest. Unexpectedly, the students seem to have much to say about Ted-based listening instruction. The reports range from at least 2000 words to 20000 words. The Students have explicitly stated the value of the material for various aspects of their English learning and many offered to compare Ted as listening materials with conventional listening materials such as BBC and VOA, offering rich insights into value of Ted as listening materials.

Electronic portfolio

For each speech, students need to complete a series of tasks in an electronic portfolio, where there is a self-reflection part in which students are encouraged to write their ideas about listening learning and instruction. This part is expected to offer complementary information to what have been collected through the report and questionnaire.

Data analysis

The collected data is analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively. A qualitative analysis is used to find out how students like

Ted-based listening instruction in general while a qualitative method used to categorize students' ideas about the pros and cons of using Ted-based materials for listening instruction.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

How do students like Ted-based listening instruction?

According to the results of student survey, a large majority of the students (60%) like Ted as materials for listening instruction. There are 2 students who like it very much and one confesses dislike for it.

A: Like very much	B: Like it	C: Just so so	D: Don't like it	E: Don't it like very much
2	21	14	1	0
5%	55%	36.%	4%	0%

A closer examination of there reports produces several revealing points regarding the likes and dislikes. Of those who like it, one student explains "like" as her top rating for learning material:

As a matter of fact, I like Ted as learning material very much. I didn't pick "like it very much" because I don't thing there is anything associated with learning that can be to much liking of students. Anyway, learning is never a relaxing activity where there is always something you have to do. However, having been exposed to so many listening materials, Ted is my second favorite, only next to TV series. (S15).

From this comment, we can see that Ted is pleasing as compared with many conventional listening materials. Of those who pick "just so-so", one student shows that attitude toward Ted as listening material is a dynamic process:

My choice is C: just so-so. Don't panic at my choice. If I were asked to choose last semester, I would pick "don't like it very much"; If asked in the first half of these semester, I would pick "don't like it". You see my feeling for it keeps changing in the process of learning. In the very beginning, listening to Ted brings me great trouble and now I can feel the sense of achievement in listening process. I think I have made great progress in my listening. Still, I didn't pick up "like it" for I have experienced difficult times with listening for the past year and Ted is too challenging to my brain and the topics chosen for class may not interest me.

After class, I can find Ted that interests me. (S26)

From this comment, we can also see that although Ted may not bring positive feelings to students, students grow on it. This is also true of the student who does not like Ted as listening materials.

Ted involves different speakers with different styles of speaking and inspiring ideas. It actually has expanded my horizon and stimulates my thinking. But I don't like it as listening material because it is too difficult for me and undermines my confidence for listening. Though Mr. Huang's suggestion and encouragement lessen the mental challenge, I still like to compare Ted as a treasure put in wrong place. It can be used when we have greater listening proficiency. (S18)

Generally speaking, more students like Ted as listening material. There are also 24 students who, without the demand of teacher, offer to compare Ted with VOA and BBC news. And they all prefer Ted to VOA and BBC as materials for listening instruction.

What do students like about Ted-based listening instruction

After a careful examination of the qualitative data collected, four things have been identified that account for students positive attitude toward Ted-based listening instruction.

Improvement of comprehensive language ability

Ted-based materials are felt to have a positive impact on general language proficiency including listening, speaking, reading and writing:

Ted is more authentic material. It is about news ideas expressed in native ways. The materials are not textbooks that are filtered in grammar and content and are not necessarily spoken in standard accents. This more authentic and more diverse contents are more conducive to our listening improvement. (S4)

Speaking is improved via taking the good language in the speech and use it in our oral communication and another great merit of ted-based listening materials is that public speech skills are developed implicitly. In this semester, there is a speech task in basic English class and what I have learnt from listening to Ted helps a lot with that. (S8)

Summary task trains my ability to grasp main idea and structure of texts. Thank to this training, I have developed the habits of focusing on the main idea and structure when reading English articles, which turns to help me also in my writing. (S17)

In writing summary after listening, my writing skills and summarizing skills are developed. There are many beautiful sentences in Ted that are often brought to our attention by the teacher and then help me a lot with my writing. (S31)

It has been argued that the development of listening can benefit other language skills (Dunkel, 1991; Rost, 2005; Vandegrift, 2007). This study supports the argument by revealing that listening is capable of doing that with right materials developed for listening instruction. Academically, Ted-based materials seems to have given a full play to the potential of Integrated-Skills approach to language teaching which advocates the idea that four language skills should be taught and learnt together to support each other (McDonough and Shaw, 1993).

Enhancement of CT ability.

Thanks to Ted-based materials, most students feel that they have improved their CT ability in listening class.

I feel I have made progress in listening after long-term efforts. As listening to Ted, I am led to figure out whether the speaker's main idea is supported by his arguments or if there is any flaw with his proposal or research method. I feel my critical thinking ability has been well-trained in interaction with Ted based materials. (S13)

As compared with the pure news materials in the first year, the ted-based listening materials over the past two semesters allow to me to listening while thinking. (S7)

CT ability is a universally agreed goal for higher education (Huang, 2010) and its absence in English major program has been long documented and regarded as the bottleneck restraining development of English major program (Huang 1998 & 2010). It is suggested that cultivation of CT ability should be instilled into instruction of each course for English majors (Sun, 2011). But the studies of CT ability development are usually carried out in the reading, writing and speaking course. Few efforts have been made to cultivate CT ability in listening instruction. This study suggests that it is possible to develop CT ability in listening instruction if right materials are used.

Expansion of horizon

Another merit of Ted-based listening material is that it has opened a window to a more diverse world to the students and broadened their horizon.

I've learnt from the speech "filter bubble" that human beings are easily confined to our familiar domain and ignore what is beyond. There are three things in this world: what we know; what don't know and what we don't know we don't know. Ted-based listening materials is a great source of knowledge, letting us know what we didn't know. (S3)

Ted is a very efficient way to expand horizon and knowledge base. It offers an almost unlimited stage for speeches on language, engineering, economy and ecology, catering for our thirsty for knowledge in different areas. What is more important, it allows us to get what is at the edge in shortest time and therefore it is very "cost-effective". (S31)

Listening is an important skill because it is a great source of our knowledge and learning (Liu & Miao, 2011). The ultimate

goal of listening instruction is to prepare students so that they can listen to know more about the world or to listen to learn. And that gives a lasting motivation to learn. Only when students feel that the learning of listening helps them learn about the world can they sustain their motivation to keep learning to listen. Some students have reported that they have developed the habit of listening to Ted and decided to listen to Ted when the listening course is over. What is more, the world knowledge acquired can in turn help listening comprehension. Listening studies have found that listening is not a passive skill but an active process where listeners build meaning by combining what is in his mind and what is coming to his mind. World knowledge has been recognized as an important element in attaining comprehension. Simply speaking, absorption of world knowledge itself is important for English majors and can in turn contribute to listening comprehension by facilitating top-down processing for listening.

Affective (emotional) engagement/transformation

As Ted is not only informative but also aimed at spreading novel ideas and inspiring changes, students are found to have put their emotions into the process of listening and modified their values and attitudes toward this world.

I am listening to the Ted speeches with a kind of respect. The speakers are from different fields and they share a common purpose of making the world a better place. Take for example the speeches for this semester I am deeply impressed and inspired by the speeches about technology, such as the one about inventions in Africa and the one about drone. What moves me is not only the technology itself but more about the care for humans instilled in it (S37).

I still remember the speech "Don't insist on English" by an English teacher. She is an English teacher and don't have worry about the disadvantages brought about by insisting on English. However, she brings about the issue, which is, in my eyes, worth applauds. It reminds me that what really changes an underdeveloped country may not be the citizens from the country but the people from "imperialist countries" they hate. (S17)

Effective emotional engagement has been one of the standards by which language

learning materials are evaluated (Tomlinson, B & Masuhara, 2011; Harwood, 2010) As compared to informative news, academic lecture as well as test materials, Ted is far more likely to engage students emotions with its diverse topics, stories and insights. After all, to spread idea and inspire audience is the purpose of Ted. In other words, Ted editors have done the first selection for listening teachers. What are listening teachers to do is to know about your students' needs and interest and choose among the good speeches the ones that can best engage your students in particular.

What do students dislike about Ted-based listening instruction

Using the same analysis, we have succeeded in identifying three things that students don't like about Ted-based instruction.

The difficulty of the materials

What students don't like most about the ted-based listening instruction is the difficulty of Ted-based materials: it can be too difficult and it has no progression of difficulty:

It is really no easy job to handle the difficulty of Ted materials. Some speeches are quite for the professionals, such as physics and biology. Though it can bring new knowledge and understanding in clear logic and structure, but the specialized knowledge and strange words undermined the above-mentioned merits. I find my mind going black when listening to this kind of speeches. But I can understand the challenges faced by the teacher to find speeches under clear topic category with appropriate difficulty for a semester or even for a year. (S4)

One of the problems with Ted is that it does not go in a "step by step" way in terms of difficulty. The speeches are made by different speakers on different topics and therefore can hardly be arranged from easy to difficulty. When the difficulty fluctuates, it is hard for us to establish our confidence in our listening improvement. (S16)

Step by step is an established principle for material development. But it is becoming very hard to realize for Ted. First, many factors contribute to the difficulty of a

spoken text such as topic familiarity, genre, speech speed, accents, length (Liang 2010; Liu & Long, 2011). Difficulty also varies with language proficiencies and students in the same class are often found at quite varying listening levels. What is more, when choosing Ted to be used as listening material, we also need to consider its value in terms of its idea and beauty of language. Given above, it is really beyond teacher's capacity to find Ted speeches that meet above-mentioned expectations and at the same time can be arranged in the order from easy to difficult. However, difficulty does affect much students' listening experience, especially in terms of sense of achievement and confidence. It is suggested that there are three things that can be done to relieve the problem. Firstly, Ted speeches could be arranged according to genre, from narrative through descriptive to argumentative for argumentative text is usually more challenging while narrative; secondly, instructors could set different tasks and criterion for task performance for speeches of different difficulties; thirdly, teachers can help students to develop tolerance for difficulty. Once students succeeded in overcoming the discomfort experienced in the beginning, they might fall in love with it and benefit from it just as the experience of Student 26 shows.

Diverse pronunciations of the speaker

There are totally 21 students who mentioned the pronunciation of the speakers. Ten of them approve the diversity of pronunciations, thinking that is how English is used in real world and good for improvement of listening ability. One student believes that they need to get used to the challenges brought by non-standard pronunciation. 3 students point it out as a problem with no further explanations. 7 students think the pronunciation prevents them from appreciating the speeches and therefore have negative impact on their listening experiences and listening motivation.

Diverse pronunciation and accents are important.
But for training of listening skills, the materials

of standard pronunciation are better. (S32)
Accents determined to a large extent my likeness for a specific speech. And my likeness determines my processing of the message conveyed the speaker. (S22)

If the listening instruction is intended to prepare students for possible listening challenges in real life, then diverse accents seem a must for selection of speakers (Lynch, 2014). However, the weird accents do have negative impact on students' motivation and learning experiences. So what confronts the listening instructor is not whether students need to be taught about different speaker characteristics but when and how. As for ted-based listening materials is concerned, there are several questions needing further exploring: Is it really necessary to introduce speeches of various accents to student in their second year? Should we avoid choosing Ted of various accents while helping students getting used to them via shorter or simpler text of other genres? If Ted speeches of various accents have to be chosen, what can be done to help student get familiar with the accents while reducing the negative effect on their motivation to the minimum? These are the questions worth further considering when choosing Ted for listening instruction.

Length of the speech

Length of speech is another aspect of Ted-based listening instruction that receives much complaint from students.

Time limit for a ted is 18 minutes. But it is too much for a listening course of which a session last 50 minutes. What is more, how wonderful does the speech need to be to keep our attention for so long? Listening to so long ted could become a process of killing time. (S1)

I really don't think long speech is a good choice as listening materials. 12 and 13 minutes is the limit. It is very easy to get distracted in the process of listening to long speech. What is more, when we are listening to it, we are asked to extracting information, paying attention to structure, which all adds to cognitive load of listening process. If it happens to be a long speech, it will be too much for me. (S7)

It is true that to engage audience attention, ted speech has been limited to 18 minutes. However, these 18 minutes limit is for native

speakers or proficient English speakers. It is too long for language learners, especially beginners. According to students' report, the negative impact of lengthy Ted is mostly on students' attention. In the standards for material development, length of text has not been stressed. This research shows that it should be an important consideration for development of listening material at least. As a matter of fact, length has been taken into consideration in choosing the Ted speech. Usually a speech over 15 minutes has been deleted. However, selecting a speech requires consideration of multiple factors as mentioned before. Sometimes, length has to be sacrificed at the expense of idea, language and relevance to the unit topic. To solve this dilemma, the instructors can divide the speech into different logic parts and play to students part by part to reduce the high demand for attention from students.

CONCLUSION

The study represents an effort to develop right materials for enhancing L2 listening instruction. It has found that Ted-based material can be a good material to mediate listening class. It can facilitate the development of students' comprehensive English ability, expansion of horizon, cultivation of CT ability and emotional engagement. However, developing new material is no easy job. To improve the effect of Ted-based instruction, more efforts need to be done to adjust the material difficulty, speech length and speaker characteristic. What is more, this study is a small-scale study aiming at the course for second-year English majors. In order to exploit the potential of Ted-based listening instruction, more studies involving more students of different levels and backgrounds will be needed.

Acknowledgement

This research is funded by *Research Project on Instruction and Assessment Reform for English Major Program* of CUFU educational and pedagogical reform funding, 2014 and *CUFU Outstanding Talent Cultivation Plan: Experimental Program of Financial Translation*, 2014 (021650514003).

Reference

- Brown, G. (1990). *Listening to spoken English*. Harlow: Longman, 2nd edn.
- Brown, J. D. (1995). *The elements of language curriculum: A systematic approach to program development*. Boston: Heinle & Heinle.
- Filed, J. (2008). *Listening in the language classroom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Harwood, N. (2010). *English language teaching materials: Theory and practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Huang, Y. S. (2010). Call for reform of English major program: Revisit to absence of critical thinking ability. *Foreign Languages World*, 20 (1): 11-16.
- Huang, Y. S. (1998). Absence of critical thinking ability. *Foreign Languages and Their Teaching*, 18 (7): 1-19.
- Huang, C.Y. (2010). Reinforcing critical thinking education. *Education Research*, 42(5): 69-74
- Liang, W. (2010). *Learner's factors in second language listening* [M]. Shanghai: Shanghai Jiao Tong University Press.
- Liu, L. & Miao, R. (2011). *Theory and practice of L2 language listening* [M]. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.
- Lynch, T. (2012). *Study listening*. [M]. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- McDonough, J. and Shaw, C. (1993) *Materials and methods in ELT: A teacher's guide*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Mishan, F. (2005). *Designing authenticity into language teaching materials*. Bristol: Intellect.
- Rivers, W. M. (1981). *Teaching foreign language skills* (2nd ed). Chicago: University of Chicago Press
- Ren, Q. (2011). *English listening instruction* [M]. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.
- Rost, M. (2005). *Teaching and researching listening* [M]. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.
- Sun, Y.Z. (2011). Toward a critical thinking-oriented curriculum for English Majors. *China Foreign Languages*, 8(3): 49-58.
- Tomlinson, B. (2003). Materials development courses. In B. Tomlinson (ed.). *Developing materials for language teaching*. London: Continuum, pp. 162-73.
- Tomlinson, B & Masuhara, H. 2010. *Research for Materials Development in Language Learning*. London: Continuum International Publishing Group.
- Vandergrift, L. (2007). Recent development in second and foreign language listening comprehension. *Language Teaching*, 40(3): 191-210.
- Vandergrift, L & Goh, C. (2012). *Teaching and learning second language listening: Metacognition in action* [M]. New York and London: Routledge.
- Wang, Q. (2011). *Thinking style and listening strategy* [M]. Shanghai: Shanghai Jiao Tong University Press.
- Wang, Y. (2012). *English listening instruction and research* [M]. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.