

The challenges of using TED Talks as authentic resources of academic listening for EFL university students

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ABSTRACT

Developing listening skills in an academic context is essential as it requires students to acquire a sufficient number of vocabulary, which will enable them to comprehend the information provided in a text. This paper explores the challenges faced by twenty-seven EFL students in an Academic Listening course using a task-based language teaching framework (Nunan, 2004; Willis, 1996; Willis & Willis, 2011). The data were collected from the students' listening journals containing accounts of their experiences during the course. The data from the journals were analyzed qualitatively to identify the themes that emerged. The results of the analysis reveal various challenges encountered by the students: unfamiliar accents, fast speed of speech, and new vocabulary. The paper ends with a recommendation to investigate vocabulary learning strategies of spoken texts.

Keywords: Academic listening; TED Talks; vocabulary learning

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INTRODUCTION

In language teaching, listening is not a neglected skill anymore since listening has recently been of interest in EFL programs (Nunan, 1999). One reason for the growing awareness of its significance is the work of Krashen (1982) on the role of comprehensible input in second language acquisition research. As pointed out by Rost (1994), listening is essential to the development of speaking skills because listening input provides a means of interaction, presents challenges for the learner to understand spoken language, and provides teachers with the means to teach language forms. When students are to listen to an academic lecture, they may already have some information or knowledge about the topic, at least from the title of the lecture. It is at this point listening difficulties may arise. According to Jordan (2002), students may have these problems in listening to academic lectures: (1) decoding, being able to recognize information, (2)

comprehending, being able to understand main ideas, and (3) note-taking, recording information briefly and quickly for listening tasks. Decoding in listening involves recognition of boundaries of phonological units, the structure of spoken discourse, the unfamiliarity of the topic of the lecture, and the speed of speech (Flowerdew, 1994; Renandya & Farrell, 2010). Listening to academic lectures is a complex task that involves bottom-up and top-down processes (Nunan, 2002). The bottom-up process of listening begins from decoding sounds for the understanding of words, phrases, sentences, and finally to whole texts in a linear fashion. The top-down process of listening involves the listener actively tries to make sense of the speaker's messages using prior knowledge of what is being listened to, which may include an experience of the topic, knowledge of the content of speaking, or knowledge of previous events. These two processes are necessary to achieve listening

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fluency. When a listener experiences decoding difficulty, he or she may utilize background knowledge to understand the information.

In an academic context, the need to develop listening skills is essential to language learners. Flowerdew (1994) points out that learners have to cope with particular demands such as understanding background knowledge, being able to identify essential and unimportant information, and taking notes if they strive to succeed in academic listening. These listening skills necessitate students to acquire a certain amount of vocabulary necessary for understanding information in a text. These demands and insufficient vocabulary knowledge could have been the reasons for students who experience anxiety in academic listening classes despite having received instruction in intensive or extensive listening courses. Learning vocabulary is a lengthy and challenging process to acquire a sizeable amount of words that are sufficient for text comprehension. In EFL settings, vocabulary can promote the development of language proficiency and build meaningful communication (Amiryousefi, 2015). One aspect of learning that all students and teachers can agree on is the role of vocabulary because it forms the core of knowledge, especially in a second or foreign language context. As pointed out by Schmitt, Cobb, Horst, and Schmitt (2015), all language use requires knowledge of vocabulary that must be learned in one way or another for learners to be able to communicate. They further state that since word families in English are very large, EFL students can't acquire all of them. What they need to know are vocabulary or words that are necessary to understand the information in a particular context.

The study carried out by Liyan, Duqin, and Chunyan (2014) shows that building the formal schema of texts improved the students' listening ability, indicating that background knowledge has a significant role in the listening process. Schema building is a pedagogical strategy that can help students cope with listening tasks in the classroom. Other strategies for listening have been the subject of much research, such as Chang (2009, 2011), Day and Bamford (1998). Their studies show that listening while reading the text improved listening comprehension, vocabulary knowledge, recognition of speech rhythm, pronunciation, and intonation. In another study, the combination of reading while listening was found helpful to students' listening fluency as it appears to serve as a useful strategy that can enhance students' confidence and motivation (Chang & Millet, 2016). It provides students with helpful background knowledge of vocabulary needed to understand the information in the text and makes listening tasks easier. The provision of listening scripts while listening is especially beneficial to low-proficiency students to exercise their auditory skills. Chang (2012) admits that listening only without assistance is difficult for

L2 learners, and to understand the information in a spoken text is even more challenging. Furthermore, vocabulary instruction has always been based on materials from textbooks, and the strategies for teaching vocabulary are either explicit or incidental.

In recent years, researchers have turned to authentic materials as sources for vocabulary learning in listening classes (Aidinlou & Moradinejad, 2016; Takaesu, 2013). Since the technology for language learning and internet facilities provide a range of options for language teachers, the use of authentic materials such as TED Talks should be easily accessible. Authentic materials will make it possible for students to experience real language use and learn content, not only language forms. Studies such as Al Azri and Al-Rashdi (2004) and Guariento and Morley (2001) have shown that authentic materials can promote motivation for learning. Berardo (2006) states that authentic materials have a positive effect on student motivation, give authentic cultural information, expose students to real language use, relate more closely to students' needs. One provision in a university setting that supports listening practice is pre-listening vocabulary instruction. Studies by Bonk (2000) and Staehr (2009) show a strong correlation between pre-listening vocabulary and listening comprehension ability. However, other studies on the relationship between vocabulary enhancement and listening test scores have been inconclusive (Chang, 2007; Chang & Read, 2006).

Likely reasons for the mixed results of such studies may be variation in the vocabulary selection for pre-teaching (Hamre, Justice, Pianta, & Kilday, 2010), the learning of decontextualized single words (Berne, 1995) which may not be helpful to learners to understand chunks of speech streams (Cocklin & Schmitt, 2008; Ellis, 2003). Within the framework of task-based language teaching, pre-task activities such as pre-teaching vocabulary are necessary (Nunan, 1989; Willis, 1996; Willis & Willis, 2007). Generally, the teacher determines the vocabulary for pre-task activities based on experience or intuition. While teachers' experiences and intuition play important roles in teaching, vocabulary for pre-teaching selected by the teacher may or may not be relevant to the learners' needs for listening practice and add to the students' learning burden. It will be of interest to explore the students' views of their vocabulary learning if they are given the opportunity to determine and select the vocabulary that they find difficult.

At the English Language Education Program, at the university where the authors are currently teaching, TED Talks are used as resources for the Academic Listening course in the second year of the program. According to the official website of TED Talk (<https://www.ted.com/>), A TED Talk is used as a showcase for speakers presenting well-formed ideas in under 18 minutes. This short talk model

works well since it only demands the audience's attention for a short period of time. TED talk has speakers from around the world who offer lectures on different topics such as technology, arts, entertainment, politics, as well as social issues. Each talk is also supplemented with a free transcript that can be downloaded and used as an aid while listening to the lecture. In this course, students are expected to develop their listening skills using TED lectures. The course has been designed as a study that explores the students' view of their vocabulary development throughout the semester. Since the focus of the study is vocabulary learning and the course made use of TED Talks, the purpose of the study is to describe what challenges the students encountered during the course using lectures from TED Talks? This study would provide teachers with information about students' difficulties in listening to authentic texts and pedagogical procedures that need to be planned in teaching listening.

METHOD

Research design

This study applies a qualitative approach in order to seek the challenges encountered by the students in using TED Talks during the Academic Listening course. Furthermore, the course is a three-credit-hour course for second-year undergraduate students who have taken two listening classes in the previous semesters that focused on intensive and extensive listening practice. These two listening courses should have equipped them with the necessary skills to meet the demands of the Academic Listening course. In this course, the students were also encouraged to visit the website of TED Talks to get more exposure to different types of lectures at their convenient times. The underlying theory of the teaching procedure in this study uses the framework of task-based language teaching (Willis, 2007; Nunan, 2004; Willis & Willis, 2011) which emphasizes the importance of task planning and

report stage in task completion; pre-listening activity, whilst-listening activity, and post-listening activity.

As the first stage, pre-listening activity, the students were presented with a word list extracted from the lecture transcript of TED talk. They underlined new words in each group (words they do not know) and copied them into a table, then looked up the meaning in a monolingual dictionary. In addition, they had to copy the sentence in the transcript that used the new word and then provided the L1 equivalents for the new word. The purpose of this activity was to provide them with sufficient background knowledge of new words through the deep learning of vocabulary. This procedure for word study was repeated each time the class met.

In the whilst-listening activity, the students were provided with an outline of the lecture content. While listening to the lecture, the students watched the video with the running text. Their task at this phase was to take short notes of the information following the outline provided. The video was played a few times for the students to record particular details of ideas in the lecture. When the video session was completed, the students discussed their notes, and in small groups, they reconstructed the lecture in the form of a summary.

The last stage was a post-listening activity. In this stage, the students basically wrote their evaluation of the lecture that had the following items: (1) title of the material or lecture, (2) how meaningful or useful was the lecture/material for their language skills development, (3) what challenges they found in listening to the lecture/material, (4) their comment on the content of the lecture/material, and (5) what they learned from the lecture/material.

In this study, six TED Talks videos were randomly chosen and used in the Academic Listening course. Those videos had different topics and were presented by speakers of different nationalities and backgrounds, as seen in Table 1.

Table 1. TED Talks videos

Title	Speaker	Background	Length: min/sec
My daughter Malala	Ziauddin Yousafzai	Pakistani Educator	16:36
What we are learning from online education	Daphne Koller	Israeli-American Educator	20:12
4 Reasons to learn a language	John Mcwhorter	American Linguist	9:53
How boredom can lead to your most brilliant ideas	Manoush Zomorodi	American Tech Podcaster	16:05
What makes a good life	Robert Waldinger	American Psychiatrist	12:39
Older people are happier	Laura Carstensen	American Psychologist	11:23

Research site and participants

This research was conducted in the English Language Education Program at a university in Indonesia. The participants for this study were twenty-seven students who enrolled in the Academic Listening course. Those students were randomly selected from the same batch (2016) of second-year whose English was approximately at

the pre-advanced level. Prior to the study, the participants were given a written statement in which they stated their agreement to participate in this research. The students had 16 meetings (48 hours) throughout the semester in this course. They had taken Intensive and Extensive Listening courses, and the knowledge and skills they acquired in those

courses should be sufficient for completing the course demands in the Academic Listening course.

Data collection and analysis

The data for this study were collected from the students' journals at the end of the semester. Each student had to submit 6 different journals as they had 6 different topics with different speakers. Each journal was submitted after each topic was completed. Their journals contained accounts of the challenges they experienced during the course. The journals were submitted online to *Moodle*, a learning management system, used in the course. The data for the listening journals were analyzed qualitatively to identify the themes of their views and comments during the course. A qualitative data

analysis software, NVivo 11, was used to analyze the data. First, each part of the journal that describes a challenge was coded and given a label. The coding process results in the automatic categorization of the labels with each category containing instances of data from all journals of the same topic. The last step in the analysis was an interpretation of the data under each category.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Accent

Figure 1 displays the proportions of the students who experienced difficulty with the speaker's accent in each TED Talk.

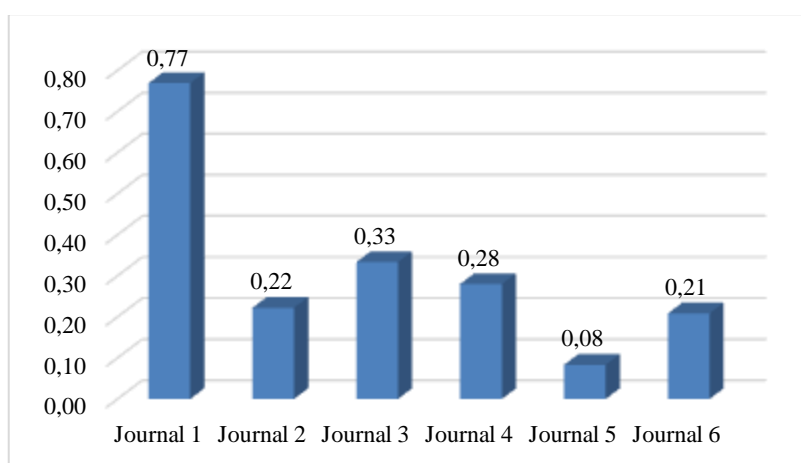


Figure 1. Challenges with the speaker's accent

As shown in Figure 1, the students stated that most of the accents in the lectures were easy to understand, except Talk 1 described in Journal 1, *My Daughter Malala*. This talk was presented by a Pakistani educator. Most students mentioned that they could not understand the talk because the speaker had a different accent, neither British nor American accent. Below are three examples of the students' comments on the accent of Talk 1, described in Journal 1. Please note that the students' comments have been slightly corrected for grammar without altering the meaning.

Extract 1 Student 1:

The speaker was using Pakistani English. In this case, his pronunciation was quite different from what I usually listened to, which is the English Standard [Standard English]. There are many different ways of pronouncing words and stress. It caused some confusion for me to understand the lecturer even though there was a transcript.

Extract 2 Student 2:

I had to be careful while listening because the speaker had a unique accent, and there were some words that were pronounced differently.

Extract 3 Student 3:

Another difficulty is the intonation of the speaker with a different accent.

The students' statements above indicate that they had difficulty in understanding the speaker since his accent, pronunciation, and intonation were not like the one that the students are familiar with. Hence, it could be inferred that accent is a crucial issue of spoken English in this context. Gilakjani (2012) also argues that learners may have more difficulty understanding unintelligible sounds than understanding speech with lexical or grammatical errors. Thus, the students in this study experienced problems due to the speaker's accent, which hindered them from understanding the talk.

Besides, one of the students also stated that the speaker pronounced the words 'incorrectly' as shown in extract 4.

Extract 4 Student 4:

The accent sounded like an Indian accent, so it made some words mispronounced.

The student's perception of the speaker's pronunciation error may have been due to the student's unfamiliarity with the speaker's Indian

accent. In other words, they lacked the ability to understand varieties of English accents by speakers of different nationalities. Based on the students' accounts above, it is interesting to know that the students labeled the speaker's pronunciation as non-standard or even incorrect. It indicates that the students' relative familiarity with the speaker's accent affects their judgment. As listeners, the students in this study may refer to their preference for British English or American English accent and rate the speaker's accent as being 'unique.' Prior learning and the use of commercial teaching materials in speaking classes and pronunciation-focused classroom activities that the students had in previous courses may have affected the students' preference for Native-English Speaker's (NES) pronunciation model. The students' preference for the NES accent may imply their desirable learning goal because it is considered to be clearer and more correct (Evans & Imai 2011; Tokumoto & Shibata 2011).

Another interesting reflection in the students' journals reveals that they appear to be able to develop listening skills by learning pronunciation without reading the subtitles in the video, as seen in extract 5.

Extract 5 Student 5:

I also have learned more about pronunciation because it is very useful and helpful if I listen to the video in English without subtitles.

This reflection may serve as a friendly reminder that teaching pronunciation needs to focus on intelligibility and comprehensibility so that students' speech can be understood relatively easily (Derwing & Munro, 2009). Therefore, in EFL contexts, the goal of teaching pronunciation may not

necessarily be targeted to explicit native-like fluency. Throughout the semester, the students in this study were encouraged to explore and expose themselves to different varieties of speech as a way to develop their learning autonomy. The online sources of TED talks should have provided support and had beneficial effects on their pronunciation development. The use of authentic materials such as TED lectures should get more interest in teaching listening, and learners should be exposed to real-life input. Scripted materials in published textbooks are often devoid of redundancy of real-life speech and lack authenticity or do not have the characteristics of informal speech (Field, 2000; Flowerdew & Miller, 2005).

Speed

The second theme emerging from the students' journals is the speed of the speaker's speech. As can be seen from Figure 2, among six TED lectures, the talk entitled, *What we are learning from online education*, presented by Daphne Koller, an Israeli-American Educator, was considered to be the most challenging. The students found it too fast, and it caused them unable to understand the information in the lecture, as revealed in the following students' remarks,

Extract 6 Student 6:

The speaker sometimes spoke too fast and not clear enough. Therefore, I did not understand what the speakers said and needed to listen to the audio intensively.

Extract 7 Student 7:

I could not hear clearly, and the speaker talked so fast. The pronunciation was difficult. So, I need a longer time to understand the words.

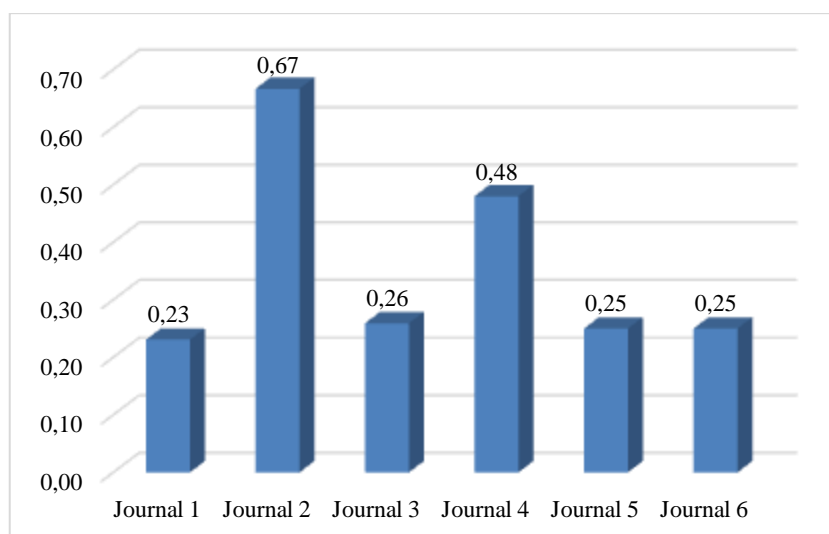


Figure 2. Challenges with the speech rate

The students' comments show that the speaker's speed of speech was the problem, which made them unable to have an optimal comprehension of the talk. The problem of understanding the speed of speech has been pointed out by Buck, as cited in Renandya and Farrell (2010), arguing that the speech rate is closely related to comprehension success. He also emphasized that in the EFL context, even a text spoken at normal speed is usually perceived as being very or even too fast by novice language learners. In the same vein, Renandya and Farrell (2010) also acknowledge that the most important source of students listening comprehension problems is the fast rate of speech. In other words, students will be sidetracked and cannot continue to decode the information due to the speech rate. Thus, the students in this study experienced difficulties in comprehending the talks due to the fast speech rate of the speaker. Consequently, the students had difficulty recognizing word meanings at the time of speech. They had to repeat the listening task by replaying the video several times, as shown in the students' comments below.

Extract 8 Student 8:

Sometimes the speaker speaks fast, so I have to replay the video several times to understand what she said.

Extract 9 Student 9:

I could not hear clearly, and the speaker speaks too fast. That makes me difficult to understand the words and made me play the video more than once.

Extract 10 Student 10:

The speed of the speaker and the way the speaker pronounces some words. One of the speakers spoke a little bit fast, so I could not get or miss some words.

Renandya and Farrell's (2010) explanation provides a clear answer to the difficulty of recognizing information in a fast speech. He argues that word sounds in speech tend to merge and may result in different forms. In addition, it is quite common for speakers to modify sounds when speaking. In other words, natural speech such as those in TED lectures may sound like a stream of sounds that are difficult for learners to parse word meanings.

Nevertheless, it is interesting to know that the students made efforts to comprehend the lecture by replaying the video several times. This is one learning strategy that has been widely discussed in the literature. As Renandya and Farrell (2010) state, repeated listening is one of the simple listening activities that at least as good as or may even be superior to strategy-based teaching. The students tried to cope with the challenges of speech rate and word recognition in order to comprehend the talk, as presented below.

Extract 11 Student 11:

However, I can solve my difficulties by watching the video not only one time but over and over again.

Extract 12 Student 12:

Then, to understand deeper, I have to listen to the material again and again until I understand.

The students' self-initiated task repetition is in line with task-based teaching principles proposed by Ellis (2009), who claims that learners improve their L2 performance by repeating the same or similar tasks with the same content.

One task assigned to the students for class activities was to write notes while listening to the lectures. This task seems to be beyond their cognitive ability, and it was too difficult to complete effectively. One student writes,

Extract 13 Student 13:

My difficulties were filling out the outline of TED while listening to TED Talk. Although I should answer it with hard thinking.

It appears that to require students to take notes while listening as a way of developing listening skills is too demanding and may not be effective. In other words, task demands that involve simultaneous receptive and productive skills are challenging for the students to accomplish. Hence, it might be better for the teachers to differentiate classroom activities into two types, receptive and productive skill activities.

Vocabulary

In addition to content knowledge, students must have good listening ability, knowledge of syntax, and a large amount of vocabulary in order to understand the information in TED talks (Staeher, 2009; Lynch, 2011). Figure 3 shows the proportions of the students who experienced difficulty with the vocabulary used in each TED Talk.

As shown in Figure 3, most of the students in this study experienced difficulty with the vocabulary. Talk 6, described in Journal 6, *Older people are happier*, was presented by Laura Carstensen, an American psychologist. The students stated that the lecture contained vocabulary they perceived as the most difficult compared to the other lectures. The students' comments can be seen in extract 14 to extract 17.

Extract 14 Student 14:

Many new vocabulary that I found, so I felt it difficult to understand the word without a dictionary.

Extract 15 Student 15:

Some words were not clear enough, and too many vocabulary words that I did not know.

Extract 16 Student 16:

Another challenge that I found when I used TED is vocabulary. There are so many vocabulary words that are at an advanced level, so it is a little bit hard to understand the material if I did not use the transcript.

Extract 17 Student 17:

The speaker used many difficult words, so I found it hard to understand the vocabulary which I have never heard before.

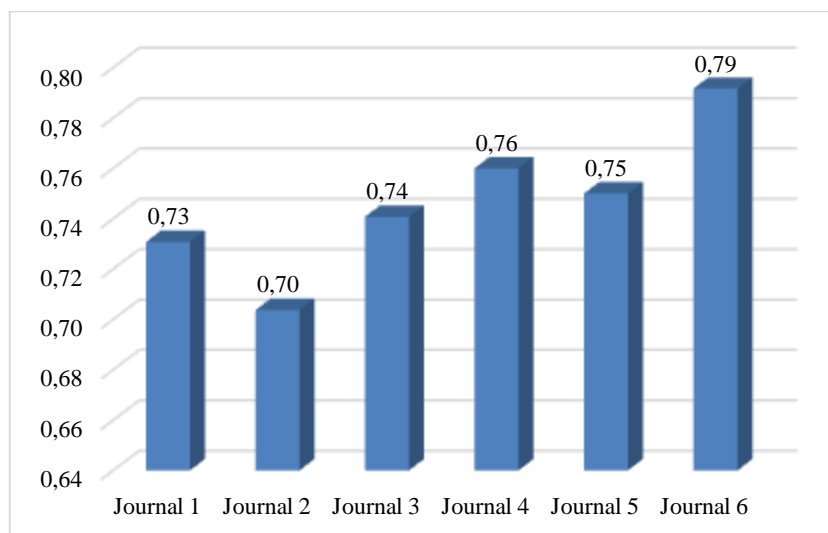


Figure 3. Challenges with the vocabulary

The students' statements indicate that despite the familiarity of the topic of the lecture, the students had problems understanding the lecture because they did not have sufficient vocabulary knowledge. In other words, lexical coverage seems to be an important issue when listening to the lecture. According to Nation (2006), lexical coverage is the percentage of running words in the text known by the readers.

As stated in extract 14 to extract 17, the vocabulary in all TED lectures used in this study was considered difficult by the students because good comprehension of the lectures requires knowledge of words in the Academic Word group (AW) and Off-list group that comprised specialized terms in the lectures. Previous studies on lexical coverage have consistently suggested that 95% coverage is required for good listening comprehension, while 98% coverage may be essential for high-level listening comprehension (Staehr, 2009; van Zeeland & Schmitt, 2013). Another study by Wang (2012) provides further evidence of the need for sufficient word coverage. Her findings indicate that to reach at least 91% and 93% coverage of TED Talks, learners should be familiar with 2.000 and 3.000-word families, respectively. Hence, introducing the vocabulary used in TED talks is crucial as a priming activity in an academic listening course. Furthermore, Field (2002) argued that learners need practice and strategies in dealing with text where they have only a partial understanding of what they hear. Considering the fact that many nonnative speakers, including the students in this study, do not

understand everything they hear, they need to make guesses and should be encouraged to do so. Renandya and Farrell (2010) suggest that the practice of extensive listening is useful in exposing learners to real-life input. In the listening journals, some students mentioned the need for strategy and support, such as reading subtitles while listening to texts.

Extract 18 Student 18:

Luckily there is a subtitle, so it helps me a lot to listen to the material.

Extract 19 Student 19:

But since there is a subtitle that helps me in understanding what the speaker said.

Extract 20 Student 20:

Then I still used subtitles to know what the speaker said.

This evidence indicates that reading while listening can be a helpful strategy to comprehend the talk. Not only that, incorporating written scaffolds, such as a full transcript, has proven to be advantageous to enhance vocabulary gains and improve learners' listening comprehension (Chang, 2011; Winke, Gass, & Sydorenko, 2010). Similarly, Vandergrift and Tafaghodtari (2010) report that the listening process is promoted by providing the appropriate scaffolding to support learners' needs. In other words, providing a transcript could be a useful written scaffold for the learners to comprehend the message conveyed in TED lectures.

CONCLUSION

The present study aimed to describe EFL students' challenges during the academic listening course using lectures from TED Talks. This study has shown that there are three challenges encountered by the students in listening to TED Talks during the course: accent, speed, and vocabulary. Different accents led the students into confusion in understanding the lectures since the students perceived the speakers' pronunciation as being unique. It should be noted that even the use of authentic materials has received much interest in teaching listening; such materials still need to be manipulated appropriately into tasks for pedagogical purposes. In general, therefore, it appears that the need and opportunity for understanding a variety of English accents by speakers of different nationalities through texts with topics of world knowledge should be created in the classroom to enhance listening skills. Exposing students with much real-life speech input is necessary because scripted materials are often devoid of the redundancy of informal speech. Speech rate was another problem identified from the students' responses, which hindered them from understanding the talk, which resulted in the students not being able to recognize word meanings. Many students in this study had problems understanding TED lectures because they had an insufficient stock of vocabulary. Hence, deep learning of new vocabulary used in the lectures may be an effective strategy in an academic listening course. Providing vocabulary exercises could be an appropriate strategy to overcome this problem. The insights gained from this study may be of assistance to language instructors in designing tasks for listening courses where vocabulary learning precedes tasks that require students to understand the information in the listening texts. Since this study was limited to one semester with 27 students, it was not possible to draw generalization across different contexts. Despite its limitations, this study certainly adds to our understanding of the nature of authentic materials and the challenges that such texts bring about to the students. Further research needs to be undertaken to explore the students' difficulties in coping with the challenges to understand authentic spoken texts such as TED lectures with more focus on vocabulary learning strategies that students may employ in the course. Such a study would shed more insights into how spoken texts affect the way students determine word meanings in speech.

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