

TED Talks**Keynote. Proficient. Student's Book**

By Pual Dummett, Helen Stephenson, Lewis Lansford

Published by National Geographic Learning, 2017

Mihaela ARSENE¹

A striking front cover, powerful colors. A presenter on a red circular stage surrounded almost 300 degrees by a captivated audience. And then you know it, even before you connect the red carpet on the stage to the three red letters. It's TED talk. For millions of us, teachers, students, and ordinary mortals, TED talks stand for inspiring communication and intellectual excitement. For a good cause, too.

The textbook series that National Geographic Learning has built around TED Talks caters to language levels from A1 to C2, and emphasizes American English or British English in separate publications. What all the Keynote textbooks have in common is a brilliant idea and a passion for enhancing English language education. The brilliant idea is to bring the TED Talks into the English class, thereby introducing the language learners to inspirational talks around exciting ideas, presented with passion, expertise, and enthusiasm. For example, the TED talks that lie at the core of the Proficient textbook under analysis present, or rather engage the readers in life-changing stories that paint a kaleidoscopic picture of our complex reality, never failing to arouse in the readers a sense of joy and excitement at the opportunities ahead.

The TED talks selected will move the engaged students and disturb the complacent ones, so no matter your approach to the wider context, you will be touched and your mind will respond to the thrill of the new opportunities. The overall message of the TED talks emphasizes the 21st century keynote ingredients of successful management in very generic terms. After all, the management of everything relies on communication, collaboration, creativity, and critical thinking.

The final comment on the TED talks is inspired by the quality of the presenters that grant charm and intellectual acumen to the textbook under review. As always, or almost, with TED presenters, they are top-of-the line experts in their field, infinitely passionate and enthusiastic about their topic and the developments they share with the audience. They occasionally bring in personal anecdotes, while self-irony is the rule. They commonly stretch the minds of the audience, at the same

¹ Mihaela Arsene, The Bucharest University of Economic Studies,
mihaela.arsene@edmerica.ro

time inviting them to entertain new ideas while literally entertaining them with their apparently spontaneous, inescapably delightful and persuasive presentations.

The TED talks provide authentic language in a variety of accents, and a range of presentation styles, that illustrate excellence in educational public speaking. Often charismatic and always informative, the TED presenters engage, educate, and enhance our lives. They are an impressive reflection of the 21st century humanity at its best.

The Keynote textbook follows the same pattern as concerns the three e's above: it engages the readers, no matter if teachers or students, it educates them language-wise and beyond, and it certainly enhances their learning outcomes and their overall educational standards.

The sheer range of topics approached and the diverse global expertise the study units tap into account for the insatiable sense of curiosity and excitement the textbook instantly arouses in the readers. A quick survey of the topics and TED talks covered will serve to illustrate it, at the same time accounting for the instant appeal on learners who have been previously exposed to the TED talk catalysts and know what intellectual and emotional gratification they offer.

Unit 1 focuses on Creativity and approaches it from the angle taken by Ken Robinson in his pivotal talk “Do schools kills creativity?” that has been watched, with good reason, by over 8 million people.

Unit 2 dwells on hopes and fears and illustrates the topic by means of a talk that has universal appeal: “Why I live in mortal dread of public speaking” by popular Australian singer and songwriter Megan Washington.

Unit 3 explores perception and brings in Julian Treasure and his talk “The 4 ways sound affects us”.

Human interaction is the focus of unit 4 which builds on the research and personal experience of Amy Cuddy from the Harvard Business School. She has encapsulated them in her viral talk “Your body language shapes who you are”.

Economic resources are brought to the fore in unit 5 by the chief magician of statistics, with a solid background in medicine, and co-founder of *Medicins sans Frontieres*. If you are a TED fan, you already know that the magician is Hans Rosling and the talk is “The magic washing machine”.

Unit 6 focuses on practical design and chooses to exemplify it by means of the talk on “Magical houses, made of bamboo” which makes the point that traditional materials, when used innovatively, can bring about positive change.

Unit 7 approaches intercultural issues in post-colonial Africa and explores the concept of “Same but different” from the perspective of a Sudanese woman writer educated in the USA. Her own experience of “Same but different” lies at the core of her talk “The danger of a single story”.

Unit 8 looks at food and sustainability and invites responsible approaches to agribusiness and eating/cooking patterns in a talk with a misleadingly simple title: “How I fell in love with a fish”.

Unit 9 picks the topic of topics in an inter-connected 24/7 wired world, that is “Internet sensation” and puts it in the hands of a YouTube manager who explores with the TED Talk audience “Why videos go viral”.

In Unit 10 the readers change gears as they have the opportunity to analyze the “Meaning of success” and enjoy an approach that runs counter to the traditional philosophy of success that business schools and MBA programs have been promoting over the past century. The title of the TED talk says it all: “A kinder, gentler philosophy of success” and it is shared by Alain de Botton.

Learning and memory are the focus of unit 11 and Sugata Mitra’s talk “Build a school in the clouds” is not poetic as the title might suggest, but rather inspirational and thought-provoking, building on innovative experiments that promote self-organized learning and minimally invasive education. All starting from the children’s natural curiosity.

Finally, unit 12 brings in the climactic topic “Invention or innovation” and relies on the talk “Creative problem-solving in the face of extreme limits” that expands on the time-honored concept of frugality (“less is more”, remember?) and shows the way of the future: “ingenuity, creativity, and entrepreneurship are far more valuable to organizations than abundant material resources and [...] they deliver innovations that provide greater value to consumers and teach us how we can all do more with less.” (p. 128)

The textbook comes full circle: it opens with a disturbing talk on creativity as stifled by the educational system ushered in by the Industrial Revolution in 18th century Britain and closes with a persuasive invitation to maximize the creative input and minimize the material one in product design, that is expanding human creativity and reducing resource depletion.

Beyond the captivating topics and the first-hand experience that the presenters bring to the talks, alongside their top-of-the-line expertise and accomplishments, the pedagogical approach is extremely helpful and productive to both learners and teachers. I have only limited experience with the textbook - I used two units, selectively, with both an undergraduate and a graduate group of students in the

Bucharest University of Economic Studies – but, in my opinion, the overall structure invites learning success.

I will illustrate the above by outlining the structure of a sample unit, the final one for example. According to the content page, the unit entitled “Invention or innovation” builds on the talk “Creative problem-solving in the face of extreme limits” and highlights three main areas, that attract the authors’ attention in each unit, that is Authentic listening skills, Critical thinking, and Presentation skills. In this particular case, under Authentic listening skills unit 12 points to Discourse markers; under Critical thinking: Summarizing an argument; and under Presentation skills: giving examples.

In practical terms this is accomplished by providing some key language relevant to the topic, and some background information on the presenter, thus preparing the students for the adapted TED talk they are to listen to later on in the unit. More key words are revisited by means of guesswork and matching activities. Then discourse markers are briskly reviewed and practised.

To keep this review practical, I will only add that each unit has a grammar focus, in Unit 12 the grammar input is around adverbs and word order, alongside adverbial phrases. The vocabulary focus in Unit 12 is related to phrasal verbs that express innovation, while the pronunciation emphasizes word endings. Reading is given full attention in two articles that resonate with the topic and explore it further. In this case, the reading texts are called “The innovation that never was” and “Life hacks”. More listening is available. It actually builds on the second reading text, jointly paving the way to the speaking activities in the unit. Their topics are beautifully suited to the overall unit theme, as apparent from their titles: “Granting patents”, “Pitching a new invention”, “Handy tips (Giving advice)”.

Each unit closes with a writing activity. In Unit 12 this writing task takes the shape of a product review and the writing skills focus on reporting verbs.

To conclude, I personally value the textbook primarily for the learning input it derives from the multi-faceted TED talks that capture - in various degrees - the beauty and the challenges of our world. The talks included provide learners with ample opportunities for connecting with real-world input while honing their language skills by exposure to authentic listening and by developing their critical thinking and presentation skills.

At this point I feel I need to give more credit to the textbook per se, irrespective of the TED content: the authors have made available a wide range of text types and infographics, alongside profiles of inspirational people, companies, and organizations that are impacting our world for the better. And yes, the language

learning tools that have been developed in each unit are, as expected, very professionally and effectively structured and sequenced.

A perfect textbook for millennial students, in my limited experience. And an ideally suited instrument for teachers who want to put the joy back into the language learning process.

The Author

Mihaela Arsene is an associate professor of business communication in English with the Bucharest University of Economic Studies. The landmarks of her professional development were the master programs she completed in the UK - with the University of Manchester ("Master of Education") - and the USA - with University of San Francisco ("Master of International and Multicultural Education"), under the aegis of the British Council and the Fulbright Commission, respectively. Her current research interests lie in the area of teacher education, student development and empowerment, U.S. academic excellence, liberal arts education, the economic history of Britain and the USA, and university engagement with the community.