

## FOSTERING PLURILINGUALISM AND SOCIAL AWARENESS THROUGH TED TALKS

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### **Abstract**

As short presentations delivered usually by experts in a specific field or known personalities, TED talks have an entertaining and informative value, as well as an educational dimension. In the past few years they have started being used in ESP classes as tools for encouraging language acquisition and the development of other competencies. This article shows how TED talks can be used to help learners develop their plurilingual competence, as well as to increase their social awareness. Special references will be made to a series of activities based on speeches selected as teaching material within the framework of the ERASMUS+ Project Oportunidance – Dance Your Way to Other Cultures.

**Keywords:** TED talks; multilingualism; social awareness; Oportunidance

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### **1. Introduction**

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Since the first TED (technology, entertainment and design) talk in 1984 in Monterey, California, this new genre has known growing success in all types of social contexts and for varied audiences. Their easy-going, humorous, almost theatrical approach to topics otherwise extremely serious and sometimes difficult to tackle, has made TED talks famous worldwide. In addition, they are short (therefore fit for today's busy audiences), they promise easy solutions to everyday issues (therefore offering the instant gratification individuals seek nowadays) and they entertain a public inclined to multitasking. Consequently, this funny first-person narrative bringing life solutions in a friendly atmosphere, which is basically the informal definition of TED talks, has found its place at the intersection of education and entertainment, as a form of "edutainment", similar to other media formats of the kind.

Thus, a valid question is whether TED talks could be successfully used in formal education, as authentic *texts*, with the objective of encouraging language acquisition and also developing learners' social competencies. This article seeks to

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answer affirmatively to this hypothesis by exploring some theoretical literature in the field and by exemplifying with a number of activities designed around TED speeches within the framework of ERASMUS+ Project *Oportunidade – Dance Your Way to Other Cultures* (2015-2017), coordinated by teachers from the Department of Modern Languages and Business Communication from The Bucharest University of Economic Studies (ASE) and the following partners: Université Libre e Bruxelles, Universidade de Lisboa, Escola Oficial d'Idiomes de Barcelona-Drassanes, Association Club Vertical/ Dance School Oportunidade, Bucharest. A life-long learning project of non-formal education addressing adults passionate about communication in foreign languages, dancing as means of entertainment and non-verbal communication and European culture(s), Oportunidade had three main objectives: developing linguistic competences in six foreign languages – French, Romanian, Spanish, Catalan, Portuguese and English – in four areas of interest – general, dance-related, business and intercultural communication, social dance competencies and digital competencies. Furthermore, the participants in the project had the opportunity to improve other soft skills, including their socializing abilities and their understanding of other cultures by communicating online and face-to-face with learners coming from other cultural environments than their own.

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## ***2. TED talks: authentic material for entertainment and education***

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### ***2.1. Authentic texts – incentive for language learning***

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Although some authors question the role authentic texts and tasks play in language learning – see, for example, Day (2003), who argues against “the cult of authenticity”, as learners find such texts more difficult – it is generally accepted that text authenticity is one of the qualities educators appreciate in language acquisition contexts. This happens mainly because they are regarded as “a stretch of real language, produced by a real speaker or writer for a real audience and designed to convey a real message of some sort”. (Morrow, 1977: 13)

Practitioners in the field of foreign language teaching/ learning seem to agree that the general goal of language acquisition is “to produce learners who are able to communicate effectively in the target language of a particular speech community, that is to say, learners who are communicatively competent” (Gilmore, 2007: 98). The same principle is applied to ESP, which is based on “the idea of relating language *form* to language *use*, making use the main criterion for the selection of ESP teaching materials” (Dudley-Evans, 2001: 22), the main purpose being to help learners acquire “the language for getting things done”. (Harding, 2007: 6) The reason why authentic materials are considered to be effective tools in this approach to language acquisition is that they are felt to express a message rather than simply focus on target language. (Gilmore, 2007: 107) In this respect, TED talks as

authentic texts which send a clear message to real audiences, are perfect materials for language learning.

Brian Tomlison also emphasizes the importance of communication in deciding on the authenticity of texts to use for language learning, and moreover, he underlines the role of each learner's interaction with the text, where its authenticity ultimately resides:

*For me, an authentic text is one which is produced in order to communicate rather than to teach, and an authentic task is one which involves the learners in communication in order to achieve an outcome, rather than practice the language. The text does not have to be produced by a native speaker and it might be a version of an original which has been simplified to facilitate communication. The task does not have to be a real-life task, but can be a classroom task which involves the use of real life skills in order to achieve not just communication, but a non-linguistic outcome (e.g. one member of a group getting the others to draw a replica of a drawing she has been shown) (Tomlison, 2012: 162).*

Moreover, Freda Mishan provides five factors for measuring authenticity: i) provenance and authorship of the text; ii) original communicative and sociocultural purpose of the text; iii) original content of the text; iv) learning activity engendered by the text; and v) learners' perceptions of and attitudes towards the text and its corresponding activity (in Bocanegra-Valle, 2010: 146).

From this perspective, using TED talks in language learning (the English language in particular, as most talks are in this language) fulfill all the above-mentioned criteria: they are original texts authored by the ones who perform them, they communicate a clear and original message, can be used for educational purposes and generally, the public perceptions towards them are positive.

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## *2.2. The role of technology in today's educational scape*

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Using technology (as TED talks are usually videoed or recorded pieces of authentic materials) constitutes another challenge for language educators nowadays. It is clear that the generation gap, so visible in many ways, is at its largest where technology is concerned. Most students are clearly more technologically minded than most of their teachers. TED talks manage to bridge this technological gap, in that they succeed in reinterpreting old style academic lectures in a modern, up-to-date manner.

The fact that they can be integrated in class activities through the use of the media is one of the most important aspects, but a comparison between the two genres clearly tips the balance towards TED talks. They are new, original, engaging, short, presented by a passionate expert and interactive, as opposed to traditional lectures,

which are longer, more rigid, often presented in a dispassionate manner. (see Table 1, Romanelli, Cain and McNamara, 2014: 2)

**Table 1. Comparison of Essential of TED Talks versus Traditional Academic Lectures**

Aspect	TED Talk	Academic Lecture
Subject	Showcase well-formed ideas New or surprising idea, challenge a belief, new argument to a great basic idea	Concepts and content around specified curricula Convey fundamental principles and concepts surrounding established or emerging basic or experiential science
Goals	Good idea takes evidence or observations and draws a larger conclusion Sharing ideas, engage audience	Educate Focus tends to be on details of the evidence
Timeframe	18 minutes Evidence for effective attention span on a topic	45-90 minutes Rationale unknown
Style	Storytelling mode	Lecture style often too structured or rigid
Assessment	Number of views, audience comments	Student assessment, faculty evaluation
Mode	Digital, async viewing	Mixed
Speaker	Topic expert, passionate about the idea	Subject matter expert, often dispassionate
Venue / Context	Relaxed atmosphere / seating Several day conference; varied activities / group interactions	Lecture hall Semester long course; 5-8 hours a day in class
Audience	Engaged group of peers	Student learners
Structure	Make audience care (relatable example or intriguing idea) Explain idea carefully How and why idea could be implemented How the idea could affect the audience	Introduction Objectives Topic 1, Topic 2, Topic 3, etc. Conclusions
Visuals	Images and photos Graphs and infographics (clear - make only one point) Little text, avoid bullet points (different points on different slides)	Images and photos Graphs and infographics (typically numerous points) Text bullet points
Preparation	Script out comments Rehearse, rehearse, rehearse	Not scripted, tend to read slides Usually not rehearsed

An interesting issue is raised by Vilhelmina Vaičiūnienė and Daiva Užpalienė (2012), that is, the link between learners' autonomy and authenticity. For them, technology is "a challenging opportunity for learners to find authentic materials and develop proficiency in ESP language studies" as "ESP is well known as using a learner-centered and content/context-based approach"; thus

*The use of technology enhances student motivation for language study by enabling them to choose activities, media sources and content topics most appropriate to their interests and learning styles. Learners particularly benefit from interacting with authentic resources where technologies play a key role encouraging students to come across authentic subject-related materials, develop critical thinking skills and become and responsible for their own learning.* (Vaičiūnienė and Užpalienė, 2012: 193)

In their study on whether learners are motivated by authentic materials based on technology in ESP conducted in 2011 at Mykolas Romeris University, researchers

found the following benefits in the view of the students: educational value, the multiple resources of information, unlimited resources for professional knowledge development, peer/ team work in information exchange, sharing of thoughts, communication and interaction and greater confidence and motivation in learning ESP. The difficulties refer to information overload and language-related problems such as very specific vocabulary and complexity of texts; overall, surprisingly, the research shows that ESP students in this university in Lithuania still prefer textbooks and resent the reality of English spoken out of the classroom.

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### ***3. Plurilingual competence and social awareness through TED talks***

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#### ***3.1. The link between plurilingualism and social awareness***

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According to the *Guide for the development and implementation of curricula for plurilingual and intercultural education (2015)*,

*Plurilingual competence is defined as the ability to use a plural repertoire of linguistic and cultural resources to meet communication needs or interact with people from other backgrounds and contexts, and enrich that repertoire while doing so. The repertoire consists of resources which individual learners have acquired in all the languages they know or have learned, and which also relate to the cultures associated with those languages (languages of schooling, regional/minority and migration languages, modern or classical languages). The plurilingual perspective centres on learners and the development of their individual plurilingual repertoire, and not each specific language to be learnt (Beacco et al, 2015: 24).*

At the same time, social awareness is raised through incorporating intercultural competence into the curriculum, as

*... this helps individuals to understand otherness better, establish cognitive and affective links between past and future experiences of that otherness, mediate between members of different social groups, and question the assumptions of their own cultural group and milieu. (Beacco et al, 2015: 24)*

The ways in which the *Guide* suggests plurilingual and intercultural education should be integrated in the curriculum are through teaching languages in an integrative manner, by coordinating the teaching of several languages or/ and by defining language aims “with a view to complementarity of the acquired competences in the individual’s plurilingual repertoire” (Beacco et al, 2015: 24). In this way, students are encouraged to make connections between all the languages they learn, to create a basis for a common understanding of modern languages, to

foster an individual portfolio of linguistic skills and knowledge and ultimately to develop autonomy in their learning.

TED talks are very well suited for this educational approach, as they present personal stories or memories which can be in different languages, and which include different aspects of the presenters' life or expertise. Thus, they encourage the listeners to combine linguistic knowledge with the culture associated with those languages. Simultaneously, learners develop social skills, such as awareness, understanding and respect for alterity and difference, self-awareness and a reflexive attitude towards different societal formations.

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### *3.2. Adaptation of materials to increase learners' autonomy*

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Using TED talks in class is certainly challenging from the point of view of adapting them to the general aims of the lesson(s), the students' level and the group dynamic. This is no easy task for teachers and in attempting it, one should pay special attention to the needs and educational goals of the students, as well as to incorporating them in a coherent educational framework.

According to Ana Bocanegra-Valle, adapting authentic materials for the ESP class is usually "a trade-off between learning needs, language content and subject-matter content" and it should take into consideration a number of issues referring to the target topic, the carrier content, relevance, knowledge of the teacher of the topic, knowledge of the students on the topic, learning goals, skills involved, accessibility and suitability, availability of the equipment, and classroom orientation of materials. (Bocanegra-Valle, 2010: 143-144)

In the adaptation process, an important role belongs to the students themselves, as this is a way of increasing students' autonomy and empowering them over the learning process. Claudia Saraceni proposes that materials be written with learner adaptation in mind, therefore aiming to be relevant, authentic and learner-centered, while criticizing published materials for their trivial, stereotypical and unmotivating style (Tomlison, 2012: 151). This is certainly a democratic method of adapting materials, which increases both students' motivation and learning autonomy, and can thus be successfully attempted with TED talks.

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### *4. The use of TED talks in the framework of the ERASMUS + Project Oportunidance – Dance Your Way to Other Cultures (2015-2017)*

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The ERASMUS+ Project *Oportunidance – Dance Your Way to Other Cultures* (2015-2017) had a multifold and complex nature, due to the multiple objectives it aimed to achieve, to the variety of strategies and tools used to fulfil these objectives, as well as to the heterogeneous group of target participants, which included adult learners of different nationalities and ages, with different lifestyles

and previous experience in terms of adult learning programs. As already mentioned, one of the main aims of the Project was to help learners communicate better in six foreign languages – French, Romanian, Spanish, Catalan, Portuguese and English. Several methods were used to achieve this specific purpose: online lessons designed by teachers from the participating higher education institutions and language schools and uploaded on a Moodle platform dedicated to the project, face-to-face language workshops and socializing events that benefitted from the presence of participants from various countries.

Initially, the coordinators of the project had planned to attract 500 participants on the platform to get involved in one or several of the language and/ or intercultural communication modules. Fortunately, participation in the online activities exceeded expectations: by December 2017, when the project ended, 1064 learners were enrolled on the platform. Moreover, there were 100 international and 124 local people involved in the three Multiplier Events, more than 300 people involved in the workshops organized by one of the partners – Association Club Vertical/ Dance School Oportunidad – and more than 150 involved in the dance events organized by other partners. Although the project formally ended on 31 December 2017, it is proving its sustainability, as on the one hand more materials are constantly being updated on the platform and on the other hand more users are enrolling to do the online activities.

The lessons on the platform covered four main areas – general, professional, dance-related and intercultural communication – and addressed three levels of proficiency, from A1 to B1. They were meant to create an interactive environment in which learners could acquire new language, enrich their knowledge of the issues discussed, as well as share their own ideas and find out what other people think about a given subject of interest.

TED talks were integrated in many of the online lessons – especially in those aimed at developing language competencies in English – both for improving listening and reading skills or enriching vocabulary as well as for giving learners new insights into how experts in specific fields or known public figures perceive given aspects of social or professional life. Furthermore, the way in which TED presenters express their views serves both to entertain the audience, thus turning learning into a fun experience, as well as to help them develop skills that would help them transmit their own messages in an effective and memorable manner.

In the following paragraphs we will provide examples of activities designed for language acquisition, development of critical thinking skills and increased social awareness using TED talks as a starting point. The discussion will focus on talks integrated in B1 lessons aimed to improve communication competencies in professional and general English.

The professional English section on the platform included references to 4 TED talks:

- Amy Cuddy – “Your Body Language Shapes Who You Are”
- Regina Hartley – “Why the Best Hire Might Not Have the Perfect Resume”
- Bel Pesce – “5 Ways to Kill Your Dreams”
- Barry Schwartz – “The Way We Think about Work Is Broken”.

These speeches were selected for two different reasons. Firstly, their length and use of language matched the objectives of the lesson. Secondly, they provide opinions meant to challenge traditional views on the topics analyzed and thus to encourage the audience to become aware of different perceptions and try to identify and justify their own viewpoint. As a result, the suggested tasks aimed to develop both proficiency in English skills and social competencies, such as critical thinking or awareness and acceptance of the possibility of having to cope with different, even opposing points of view.

The objective of the first task that learners were encouraged to fulfil was to develop their listening and comprehension skills. Thus, they were directed to refrain from using the subtitle option or the interactive transcript option until they had watched the video several times and understood the main ideas being discussed. However, it is our belief – based on learners’ testimonials – that even after understanding the main points learners used the transcripts and options to either check how specific words are written or to make sure they have understood everything. This activity was meant to have a positive impact on their writing abilities in the target language.

Secondly, learners were encouraged to complete listening/ reading comprehension activities such as deciding whether statements related to the talks are true or false, matching sections of the talks to the ideas expressed in those sections or matching sentence parts.

An interesting task based on the TED talks was the interactive follow-up activity included in each lesson, which required learners to think of the issues discussed in the talks and to share their own views about them in the form of online written communication between course participants. Rather than simply writing isolated texts, learners were encouraged to read other people’s posts, reply to them and thus engage in opinion-sharing. The questions related to the talks mentioned above were:

- Is body language important in business? Give some reasons for your answer.
- Who would you prefer to work with: people who have faced challenges in their life or people who have had no trouble reaching their professional goals? Give some reasons for your choice.

- What are in your opinion the things that you should avoid if you want to be successful in your current or future professional life?
- What motivates you to go to work? If you do not have a job yet, what are in your opinion the main reasons why people have jobs?

These interactive tasks had a multidimensional purpose. From the perspective of language acquisition, they served as tools for improving learners' written communication, as well as their reading competencies. From a wider perspective, they were meant to engage learners in communication-related activities and to give a more personal touch to their learning experience by encouraging them to become active participants in the process rather than passive recipients of knowledge shared by other people. Furthermore, they were given the chance to reflect on the new information and to express their own opinion about it, as well as to accept other people's viewpoints, even if they did not match their own perceptions.

The same multifold and interactive approach to activities based on TED talks was adopted in the general English lessons. In the B1 section the following talks were suggested as basis for activities:

- Tim Urban – “Inside the Mind of a Master Procrastinator”
- Cameron Russell – “Looks Aren't Everything. Believe Me, I'm a Model”
- Richard St. John – “Success Is a Continuous Journey”.

After watching and listening to the talks, learners were prompted to consider their own attitudes regarding the issues presented and to describe their own experience. For instance, after watching Tim Urban's talk on procrastination, learners were invited to analyze a set of practices and group them according to whether they indicate good or bad time management. They were also asked to give examples of 3 things they have postponed doing, list some reasons why they have not completed the selected activities and come up with a list of solutions to tackle tasks in a more time-effective manner. Cameron Russell's talk on appearance in nowadays' society was followed by tasks requiring learners to share their opinions about image and the role it has on how we perceive people. First, they were asked to discuss a set of statements extracted from the talk: “Image is powerful, but also, image is superficial”, “How we look has a huge impact on our lives” and “Pictures in fashion magazines are constructions. They don't show the real people”. Then, they were asked whether they themselves judge people according to their image and they were given a list of aspects to consider, such as people's height or weight, the color of people's hair (especially in the case of women) or the length (in the case of both women and men), women wearing or not wearing makeup, what people wear, or distinctive marks on people's bodies (i.e. tattoos). Richard St. John's talk was followed by activities in which learners were encouraged to define success in different stages of their lives and to show how they think success can be achieved.

The follow-up activities based on the three TED talks integrated in the B1 general English lessons encouraged discussions among participants starting from the following requirements:

- Start a discussion in this forum describing your weaknesses in terms of time management and asking for people's advice. Then browse and give your own advice to other course participants who require it.
- Discuss about how *beauty* is defined in your culture and how fair you personally think it is to judge people according to their physical appearance.
- Talk about your 5 rules for achieving *success* in life. Feel free to reply to other people's texts as well.

The learners' response to the TED talks and to the activities based on them was positive. Their responses to the follow-up activities proved both that they had acquired new language structures to discuss the topics suggested and that they were eager to share their opinions with other participants.

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### **5. Conclusions**

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There is no doubt that the fast-paced rhythm of life and the development and expansion of new technologies, all struggling to capture and keep people's attention has had an impact on learning in and out of the classroom. With learners' attention spans becoming increasingly shorter and sources of distraction becoming more and more sophisticated and effective, it is important for language teaching to adapt to learners' needs and to provide not only useful, but also entertaining tools to facilitate language acquisition and use in personalized, real-life contexts. TED talks seem to achieve this purpose, as they expose learners to language which is used authentically to express often controversial and challenging views. While helping learners to improve their communication skills in foreign languages, they also increase their awareness of social issues and they provide interesting subjects for discussion. This explains why they have started being integrated more and more in classes of communication in foreign languages.

The main focus of the language and intercultural communication modules designed within the framework of the ERASMUS+ Project *Oportunidance – Dance Your Way to Other Cultures* (2015-2017) was to help learners to acquire specific language skills, as well as transversal skills (such as, for example, awareness and empathy towards diversity of cultures, influence of own language and cultural stereotypes on understanding cultures of others, mediating cultural exchange and conflicts). According to feed-back received from the users this goal was achieved, as during most of our dissemination events participants declared that the activities in which they were encouraged to get engaged were very creative, offering new

ideas, transferable to a very large range of contexts. They also said that they had already found ways of integrating the newly acquired knowledge and skills in their personal and professional lives. Finally, they emphasized the importance of being able to learn new things while having fun and making use of up-to-date online sources and unconventional learning materials. Based on this feedback from the participants, we can infer that the use of TED talks as an instrument for language acquisition, development of critical thinking and social awareness skills and starting point for self-reflection and discussion among learners in the framework of the ERASMUS+ Project *Oportunidade – Dance Your Way to Other Cultures* (2015-2017) had a significant contribution to the general success of the online lessons, as well as of the whole project.

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