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Kamil Abt

Uniwersytet Zielonogórski

IS TED REALLY GOING TO FIGHT TEDIOUS CLASSES? A REVIEW OF ‘MAŁGORZATA KARCZEWSKA. 2024. *TED TO FIGHT TEDIOUS CLASSES*. ZIELONA GÓRA: OFICyna WYDAWNICZA UNIwersYTETU ZIELONOGÓRSKIEGO’



This book for advanced students of English, interestingly titled, as if it were a newspaper headline, comes at a time of intense interest in TED Talks as resources for English language teaching. A cursory Google Scholar search using the term, ‘TED Talks English language learning’ returns over 200,000 hits. There are a number of English language textbooks utilising TED Talks on the TEFL market, published by both the largest publishers as well as the smallest, independent ones. These include the *Keynote, 21st Century Reading: Creative Thinking and Reading with TED Talks and Perspectives* series from National Geographic Learning,¹ *How to Teach with TED Talks: A Practical Guide for English Teachers*,² and a number of others.³ Małgorzata Karczevska’s *TED to fight tedious classes* does not aim to compete with any of the above-mentioned publications, nor does it claim to offer anything new. Rather, the book “is the fruit of [her] experience in teaching practical English classes at the University of Zielona Góra [in] Poland” and, as such, it is a concise, well-organised and logical collection of techniques and methods the author has found useful and productive in her own teaching practice.⁴

¹ ‘Search Results for “TED” | National Geographic Learning’ <<https://www.eltngl.com/catalog/search?query=TED>> [accessed 10 February 2025].

² Lewis Lansford, *How to Teach with TED Talks: A Practical Guide for English Teachers* (Independently published, 2021).

³ Naheen Madarbakus-Ring and Stuart Benson, ‘TED Talks and the Textbook: An In-Depth Lexical Analysis’, *Languages*, 9 (2024), pp. 1-18, doi:10.3390/languages9100309.

⁴ Małgorzata Karczevska, *TED to Fight Tedious Classes* (Oficyna Wydawnicza Uniwersytetu Zielonogórskiego, 2024), p. 7.

The source material in Karczewska's book was, first and foremost, chosen as a source of inspiration for the creation of engaging classes. As a result, the book satisfies a fundamental requirement in the selection of teaching materials for language acquisition, namely, that they be inspiring to students. Indeed, TED Talks have been found to have the potential to inspire university students of English.⁵

Besides the need for professional inspiration, *TED to fight tedious classes* aims to satisfy a number of other, more practical needs of the English teacher. One of these is that content should be easily accessible via the Internet for both teachers and students, both in the classroom and at home. Whilst the question of whether it is more convenient for students and teachers to carry and use textbooks, rather than laptop computers, is often a matter of personal choice, the idea that online access to course materials is beneficial depends on structural factors like access to Internet technology and infrastructure, as has been pointed out, particularly in non-Western contexts.⁶ Indeed, considering the continuing existence of the gap in access to Internet technology and online sources between the global north and the global south,⁷ relying on TED Talks as an Internet resource for language learning could contribute to further inequality, which is particularly problematic because the need for English language education is most pervasive in the global south. As such, the advantage that TED Talks offer through their online availability is clearly context dependent. One obvious solution to this potential access inequality is to provide offline access to the materials.

It is not immediately clear how the other advantages of using TED Talks, mentioned by the author in the introduction, serve the interests of language learners. One of these benefits is said to be the status of TED Talks as edutainment, which combines education with entertainment. Whilst there has been research supporting the author's claim that this medium of instruction is popular amongst students⁸ and that students believe their learning will be enhanced when it is used,⁹ which thus demonstrates the effectiveness of TED Talks in achieving the goals of edutainment – that is, to attract and hold the attention of audiences – there has also been criticism of the format be-

⁵ Katarzyna Kozińska, 'TED Talks as Resources for the Development of Listening, Speaking and Interaction Skills in Teaching EFL to University Students', *Neofilolog*, 56.2 (2021), pp. 201-21, doi:10.14746/n.2021.56.2.4.

⁶ Shouket Ahmad Tilwani and others, 'The Impact of Using TED Talks as a Learning Instrument on Enhancing Indonesian EFL Learners' Listening Skill', *Education Research International*, 2022.1 (2022), p. 8036363, doi:10.1155/2022/8036363.

⁷ Siew Ping Han and Ben Kumwenda, 'Bridging the Digital Divide: Promoting Equal Access to Online Learning for Health Professions in an Unequal World', *Medical Education*, 59.1 (2025), pp. 56-64, doi:10.1111/medu.15455.

⁸ Małgorzata Karczewska, *TED to Fight Tedious Classes*, p. 7.

⁹ Harnani Mat Zin and Nor Zuhaidah Mohd Zain, 'The Effects of Edutainment towards Students' Achievements', in *Regional Conference on Knowledge Integration in ICT*, 2010, cxxix, 2865.

cause, among other things, it promotes the idea that learning should always be fun and enjoyable and that information can thus be acquired without work or commitment.¹⁰ Nonetheless, the use of edutainment by Karczevska does not come at the expense of actual work and study, since each chapter comprises exercises that do indeed require effort and concentration, and, as such, the justification for using the medium based on its popularity with students is valid.

TED to fight tedious classes is composed of four parts, which are defined in terms of the overall topics covered therein (Language and communication, The animal world, Medical issues, Psychology and well-being). Each part finishes with a topic that overlaps with the following one, thus leading to smooth and logical thematic transitions. The themes in each of the parts and the particular topics covered within each chapter are broad in vocabulary and interesting in that they cover a large cross-section of social issues. However, they are politically neutral (besides the tacit promotion of a biopolitical agenda via an emphasis on health norms) and uncontroversial, not equipping students with the linguistic tools to navigate social and political life freely (except, notably, for the chapter on lying which presents some clues as to how to recognise the linguistic habits of liars). The book would have benefited from the inclusion of texts addressing critical issues, particularly as TED Talks are supposed to share “knowledge that matters”,¹¹ and thus “drive meaningful change”.¹² Granted, there is little on the TED website that would fill these attention-grabbing, populist signifiers with much meaning, but on the surface they do suggest that TED Talks should constitute a form of political or social critique. Unfortunately, from the perspective of critical theory, the kind of mass communication represented by TED Talks is institutionalised and corporatised, and grounded in elitist practices and discourses that are effective in disseminating information, but are unlikely to promote fundamental social change.¹³ They are also sexist and racist, with more than half of all the speeches made throughout the history of the platform having been presented by white males; even though the proportion of female presenters has been increasing in response to critical examination, there has not been a significant increase in the presence of non-white ethnic groups at TED, which are significantly underrepresented.¹⁴ A critical framework with which to approach TED Talks is also

¹⁰ Zühal Okan, ‘Edutainment: Is Learning at Risk?’, *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 34.3 (2003), pp. 255–64, doi:10.1111/1467-8535.00325.

¹¹ ‘TED Talks’ <<https://www.ted.com/watch/ted-talks>> [accessed 10 February 2025].

¹² ‘TED About’ <<https://www.ted.com/about>> [accessed 11 February 2025].

¹³ Tobias Denskus and Daniel E. Esser, ‘TED Talks on International Development: Trans-Hegemonic Promise and Ritualistic Constraints’, *Communication Theory*, 25.2 (2015), pp. 166–87, doi:10.1111/comt.12066.

¹⁴ Carsten Schwemmer and Sebastian Jungkunz, ‘Whose Ideas Are Worth Spreading? The Representation of Women and Ethnic Groups in TED Talks’, *Political Research Exchange*, 1.1 (2019), pp. 1–23, doi:10.1080/2474736X.2019.1646102.

warranted because the platform is constituted by texts that are both compatible with and contradictory to notions of critical pedagogy. These notions stress that dominant education systems have the potential to suppress education, that education can work against the nature of the individual, that it can serve the purposes of training the type of person desired by neoliberal policies, that there are inequalities in access to education, that social justice and inclusiveness are not always ensured through education, that the student is passive in the majority of systems and that the teacher is still a figure of authority in the classroom.¹⁵ Since the language learning approach promoted in *TED to fight tedious classes* prioritises meaning rather than language *per se*, a critical component seems vital in light of the above-mentioned shortcomings. Accordingly, the kind of critique suggested here might need to rely not on the content of the talks – which are rarely critical – but on the guidance of the teacher presenting the material in the book.

The racial and sexist critique of TED Talks, presented above, is elegantly sidestepped in *TED to fight tedious classes* because the selection of talks does not feature presenters. Instead, the visual element of the presentations is made up of animations. As such, there are no explicit images of either men or women, nor of any particular ethnicity, white or otherwise. Nevertheless, the critique is not completely irrelevant because only five¹⁶ of out twenty of the speeches are narrated by women and only one of them features a non-American English accent, suggesting a Western, if not necessarily white, ethnicity.¹⁷ However, there is more equality when considering the authors of the speeches used in the book, with almost half having been authored by women.

With the points raised above regarding English accents in mind, the author's claim that one advantage of using TED Talks as a source of material is that "TED presenters are (mostly) native speakers of English, [and thus] students have exposure to a variety of English accents"¹⁸ is somewhat misleading, since her selection of talks includes no variations in accent, except for one instance. Nonetheless, the point she makes regarding the availability of accents in TED Talks is valid, even though she does not avail herself of the opportunity to use them. Indeed, not only do TED Talks include a variety of native accents; there are also many talks in which the speakers' first language is clearly *not* English. Had these speakers' utterances been used, students using *TED to fight tedious classes* would have a chance to deal with English spoken in a multitude of ways. From a practical point of view, the ability to understand more than just native English

¹⁵ İlhan Polat, Abdulkadir Sağlam, and Serkan Çelik, 'Education-Themed TED Talks from the Perspective of Critical Pedagogy', *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies*, 45.3 (2023), pp. 310-32, doi:10.1080/10714413.2023.2202592.

¹⁶ The benefits of a bilingual brain, How languages evolve, How do dogs "see" with their noses, Why elephants never forget, Three tips to boost your confidence.

¹⁷ The one exception – *How do cigarettes affect the body* – is narrated by a male, in British English.

¹⁸ Małgorzata Karczewska, *TED to Fight Tedious Classes*, p. 7.

is important because, from both a professional and academic perspective, students are most likely to communicate in English with people from non-English speaking countries.¹⁹ Furthermore, the availability of such a variety of TED Talk speakers, each of whom uses English in their own idiosyncratic ways, comes with the potential of exposing students to contemporary and non-standard uses of English that may not be found in textbooks, but unfortunately, this potential is unfulfilled in *TED to fight tedious classes*.²⁰ Research has shown that not only do learners of English show different levels of comprehension depending on the English accent they are listening to, but also that familiarity with an accent makes it easier to comprehend.²¹ As an aside, students' ability to mimic an accent improves their ability to comprehend it and, as such, lessons should not only expose students to a variety of both native and non-native accents but also give them the opportunity to imitate these accents.²²

The speeches selected by Karczevska for her book utilise elegant, correct, clear and well-enunciated English. However, they are all read at a relatively slow speed of around 135 words per minute,²³ and because they are scripted they eschew many of the characteristics of natural speech such as slang, jargon, mispronunciation, pauses, mistakes, and corrections. Yet research casts doubt on the idea that manipulating aspects of speech (including speed, content and form) is beneficial to language learners. Indeed, authentic and natural speech is the most useful in improving comprehension, because it helps students focus on meaning rather than on language.²⁴ As mentioned

¹⁹ Olga Nezhyva, 'Ted Talks as a Digital Material in Foreign Language Teaching', 2023.

²⁰ Akkenje Komekova, 'Empowering Language Learning: The Impact of TED Talks on Listening Skills and Beyond', *Scientific Collection «InterConf+»*, 39 (179), 2023, pp. 127-34.

²¹ Dilek Büyükahıska and Ahmet Can Uyar, 'The Effects of Different Accents on Listening Comprehension in EFL Classes', *OPUS International Journal of Society Researches*, 14.20 (2019), pp. 1369-94; Kevin Cogswell Browne, 'Raters' Accent-Familiarity Levels and Their Effects on Pronunciation Scores and Intelligibility on High-Stakes English Tests' (unpublished thesis, University of Leicester, 2016) <https://figshare.le.ac.uk/articles/thesis/Raters_accent-familiarity_levels_and_their_effects_on_pronunciation_scores_and_intelligibility_on_high-stakes_English_tests/10234613/1> [accessed 8 February 2025].

²² Yu-Lin Cheng, 'Unfamiliar Accented English Negatively Affects EFL Listening Comprehension: It Helps to Be a More Able Accent Mimic', *Journal of Psycholinguistic Research*, 47.4 (2018), pp. 899-911, doi:10.1007/s10936-018-9562-y.

²³ Natural speech in English ranges from 140-180 words per minute, with an experimental value of 155 taken as natural. Y Hetti Pathiranalage Sulakshika Ashari Yapa Dissanayaka, Brett R. C. Molesworth, and Dominique Estival, 'Miscommunication in Commercial Aviation: The Role of Accent, Speech Rate, Information Density, and Politeness Markers', *The International Journal of Aerospace Psychology*, 33.1 (2023), pp. 79-97, doi:10.1080/24721840.2022.2154672; Caroline Jones, Lynn Berry, and Catherine Stevens, 'Synthesized Speech Intelligibility and Persuasion: Speech Rate and Non-Native Listeners', *Computer Speech & Language*, 21.4 (2007), pp. 641-51, doi:10.1016/j.csl.2007.03.001.

²⁴ Carol A. Herron and Irene Seay, 'The Effect of Authentic Oral Texts on Student Listening Comprehension in the Foreign Language Classroom', *Foreign Language Annals*, 24.6 (1991), pp. 487-95, doi:10.1111/j.1944-9720.1991.tb00495.x; Kozińska, 'TED Talks as Resources for the Development of Listening, Speaking and Interaction Skills in Teaching EFL to University Students.'

earlier, while Karczewska is aware that natural language works best when developing listening comprehension skills, she has nonetheless chosen to use prepared speeches, which are clearly meant to be used for education – if TED’s mission statement has anything to say on the topic –²⁵ despite her claim to the contrary.²⁶ While some research has shown that comprehension test results can be higher with slower speech, slowed-down speech or speech with captions or subtitles,²⁷ other work suggests that the rates of improvement in listening comprehension are higher with natural speech than in the case of slowed-down speech.²⁸ In any case, whether or not the results of tests utilising slowed-down speech are better than those using natural speech is irrelevant in real speaking situations, where speakers do not always slow down their speech and subtitles or captions are not available. Furthermore, there is no evidence that making sense of speech at slow speeds leads to the ability to make sense of fast speech.

As mentioned above, the presentations used in *TED to fight tedious classes* use animations for their visual content, thus removing non-verbal language as an aid to understanding and meaning-making. Whilst the presence of non-verbal language makes it easier to make sense of speech, as it provides context and cues, the potential effect of forcing students to focus exclusively on sound is lost in the case of this book because the animations and other graphical elements featured in the presentations still give clues as to the meaning of the speech. Alternatively, recordings of real people giving presentations are more beneficial for listening comprehension because they present a fuller picture of natural language use and show students the potential practical applications of English, including different language activities like passing on messages and communicating ideas effectively. Moreover, real-life visual materials help students learn presentation and public speaking skills through modelling; students can thereby develop confidence, organisation, and skills of persuasion. Moreover, TED presentations simulate real-world language usage for students because they synthesise linguistic

²⁵ “TED is dedicated to researching and sharing knowledge that matters through short talks and presentations [and its] goal is to inform and educate global audiences in an accessible way.” *Emphasis added* ‘TED Talks’.

²⁶ Karczewska asserts that, “as TED Talks are authentic materials, students can see how they cope with materials not originally meant to be used in education”. Małgorzata Karczewska, *TED to Fight Tedious Classes*, p. 7.

²⁷ Asma Almusharraf and others, ‘Video Captioning and Subtitles in Second Language Listening Comprehension: Fast-Paced Versus Slow-Paced Speakers’, *Journal of Psycholinguistic Research*, 53.2 (2024), p. 29, doi:10.1007/s10936-024-10070-z; Laura Mahalingappa, Jiakuan Zong, and Nihat Polat, ‘The Impact of Captioning and Playback Speed on Listening Comprehension of Multilingual English Learners at Varying Proficiency Levels’, *System*, 120 (2024), p. 103192, doi:10.1016/j.system.2023.103192.

²⁸ Abdolmajid Hayati, ‘The Effect of Speech Rate on Listening Comprehension of EFL Learners’, *Creative Education*, 01.02 (2010), p. 107, doi:10.4236/ce.2010.12016.

and visual elements of language in a holistic way.²⁹ Finally, though inspiration is a key driver in language acquisition, and despite student assertions that TED Talks do inspire them,³⁰ the videos in *TED to fight tedious classes* are unlikely to inspire students precisely because they do not include natural-language presenters.

Each chapter of *TED to fight tedious classes* consists of an animated TED Talk and a series of accompanying exercises. These usually follow a consistent pattern comprising preliminary discussion questions, listening comprehension questions as well as post-listening vocabulary exercises and questions for discussion. Moreover, there are exercises focusing on particular vocabulary items featured in the film in question and grammar exercise of varying kinds, based on or inspired by the films. Each chapter has some variations on the progression or content of the exercises.

As a whole, the battery of exercises is progressive and in line with research on effective design of activities for enhancing listening, from both a product-oriented point of view, which tests listening, and a process-oriented point of view, which deals with the *how* of listening. As such, the activities incorporate planning for listening and predicting, follow-up speaking, reading and writing activities, as well as grammar and vocabulary activities. The TED Talks used also give scope for the incorporation of bottom-up segmental and supra-segmental activities, that could have been incorporated in the book to teach students how to make meaning from information gleaned at the phoneme, syllable, or word level, as well as by using intonation, word stress, and pauses. Further enhancement of the process-oriented aspects of the exercises might have included activities aimed at getting students to monitor their own comprehension (for example, by comparing their predictions of what will be mentioned in the videos with what is actually mentioned), having them solve their own comprehension problems (for example, by using inference to fill in details they may have missed or by asking for clarification), and encouraging them to evaluate their listening and problem-solving abilities, which is another meta-cognitive aspect of listening skills.³¹ None of the activities in *TED to fight tedious classes* precludes the incorporation of such activities in class, and it is perhaps an advantage of the book that it does not overload teachers with exercises, but rather gives them materials that facilitate the development of process-oriented skills.

²⁹ Kozińska, 'TED Talks as Resources for the Development of Listening, Speaking and Interaction Skills in Teaching EFL to University Students'; Khaled A. Alghmadi, 'Enhancing EFL Saudi University Students' Speaking Proficiency through TED Talks', *Journal of Pedagogical Research*, 8.1 (2024), pp. 159-71.

³⁰ Kozińska, 'TED Talks as Resources for the Development of Listening, Speaking and Interaction Skills in Teaching EFL to University Students'; Komekova, 'Empowering Language Learning: The Impact of TED Talks on Listening Skills and Beyond'.

³¹ Huong Nguyen and Marilyn L. Abbott, 'Promoting Process-Oriented Listening Instruction in the ESL Classroom', *TESL Canada Journal*, 34.1 (2016), pp. 72-86.

It would have been useful for teachers if the book had included both answer keys and scripts to allow them to easily formulate the kinds of activities mentioned above and to address students' clarification questions about the videos more easily. Moreover, the types of vocabulary exercises found in the post-listening sections, which tend to focus on definitions, might be better suited to the pre-listening stage, which would result in better comprehension,³² while the post-listening vocabulary exercises might include tasks which require students to use the vocabulary just learnt in different contexts from that of the video, so as to connect new knowledge with what students might already know. As far as the pre-listening warm-up activities are concerned, almost half of the questions are of the closed yes/no type, which are not necessarily as effective in generating speech or developing communication, analysis and reasoning as open-ended questions.³³ Furthermore, in the interests of variety, product-oriented multiple-choice and true/false questions could have been incorporated throughout, especially since these can be used to evoke competition and thus deepen student engagement in the material at hand.

In general, language students ask simpler and lower-order level questions than teachers when it comes to interrogating a text for the purposes of comprehension, while teachers have a tendency to use questions supplied to them by textbooks rather than coming up with their own.³⁴ As such, activities should predominantly be based on high-level questions, which also stimulate students to formulate their own questions when reading a text. However, even though *TED to fight tedious classes* is aimed at higher-level students, the questions provided in the text are quite simple in the sense that they are non-critical and do not interrogate the structure of the speeches themselves, nor the kind of assumptions they make about their subject matter. As such, they do not challenge common narratives, expose contradictions, interrogate power structures, or prompt self-reflection. To enhance understanding and thus language proficiency, critical thinking should be introduced via questioning, with materials providing a balance of higher- and lower-order questions. Importantly, students should be given a chance to formulate their own questions, which further develops listening comprehension,³⁵

³² Dukhayel M. Aldukhayel, 'Impact of Vocabulary Preteaching and Content Previewing on the Listening Comprehension of Arabic-Speaking Efl Learners', *Informing Science*, 26 (2023), pp. 23-38, doi:10.28945/5076.

³³ Owen Henkel and others, 'Can LLMs Grade Short-Answer Reading Comprehension Questions : An Empirical Study with a Novel Dataset' (arXiv, 2024), doi:10.48550/arXiv.2310.18373.

³⁴ Eda Isir and Yusuf Uyar, 'Investigating Reading Comprehension Questions and Student-Generated Questions in Language Lessons in Terms of Level', *Education Quarterly Reviews*, 5.4 (2022), pp. 440-55.

³⁵ Liana Barseghyan and Lusik Hovakimyan, 'Igniting Curiosity and Critical Thinking: The Impact of Higher-Order Questions in EFL Class', *Foreign Languages in Higher Education*, 28.1 (36) (2024), pp. 170-84.

especially when done in the context of process-oriented prediction work. In connection with the idea that TED Talks are a form of edutainment, as discussed above, the presentations actually represent an emerging new genre constituted by the genres of the sales pitch, the academic lecture and the memoir.³⁶ As such, they form the kind of fertile ground needed for discussion and analysis of the critical aspects mentioned above.

In summary, *TED to fight tedious classes* is a practical and well-designed contribution to textbooks dealing with listening comprehension based on the TED Talks platform. It includes interesting topics with well planned accompanying exercises and has been written in a clear, concise and practical style. However, the selection of topics lacks a critical edge which would allow students to deal with the content of the talks in a more meaningful manner. Furthermore, it does not capitalise on the rich source of natural and varied Englishes that is available through TED Talks, nor does it give students a chance to see real people using both verbal and non-verbal forms of communication. Finally, the activities and exercises lack variety and do not engage fully with the process-driven aspects of listening comprehension. Nevertheless, *TED to fight tedious classes* is a useful resource for designing listening comprehension classes.

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³⁶ Julia Ludewig, 'TED Talks as an Emergent Genre', *Clcweb-Comparative Literature and Culture*, 19.1 (2017).

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