

How suitable are TED Talks for Academic Listening?

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What does this article investigate?

TED talks are often used to provide academic listening practice as they appear similar to lectures. This article conducts a discourse analysis of lectures and TED talks to investigate the suitability of these talks for EAP listening practice.

What evidence is summarised?

Academic Vocabulary: Analysis of 727 lectures from The Lecture Discourse Corpus (Yale University lecture series), and 49 TED talks.

Lexical Density & Speech Rate: 43 one-minute samples from the Lecture Discourse Corpus, and 47 one-minute samples from the TED Talk Corpus.

What are the main findings related to my teaching?

On average, TED Talks were not sufficiently similar enough to lectures to be considered semi-authentic listening practice, for the following reasons:

- Use of Academic Vocabulary: TED Talks had 43% less usage of vocabulary from the Academic Vocabulary List in comparison to lectures.

- Speech Rate: This was found to be significantly faster in TED talks in comparison to lectures, both in terms of syllables per second, and words per minute:

	Lectures	TED Talks
Syllables per second (mean)	3.52	4.01
Words per minute (mean)	145	169

The author surmises this may be due to the time limitations placed on presenters, pressure to keep the audience attention, and / or because TED is a scripted genre.

- Lexical Density: Both lectures and TED talks were found to be similar in terms of lexical density (i.e., use of content words). However, in lectures, as lexical density increased, speech rate decreased. This was not found in TED talks (perhaps because they are scripted), potentially rendering them less accessible and more challenging compared to lecture discourse.

Additional Information

- Lectures in Social and Natural Sciences had greater use of academic vocabulary than those in Arts & Humanities.

- TED talks with the 'Entertainment' tag showed substantially lower levels of academic language than those tagged 'Design' or 'Technology'.

- Some TED talks do fall outside the bracket of the main findings, and could still be used in EAP contexts. These would need to be vetted carefully, however.