Reflections on choosing a prescribed book for a university business presentation skills course: why TED Talks Storytelling: 23 Storytelling Techniques from the Best TED Talks by Akash Karia fits the need

Abstract:

The choice of course material is always bound to the needs and abilities of the students who will be using them. English Studies in the first quarter of the 21st century has to walk a fine line between the traditional, idealised idea of a teaching and research university offering a liberal education and the more employment-oriented, marketized idea of a university equipping students with competences for life after their studies. Offering business soft skills courses within a B.A. in English allows students to develop transferable skills whilst improving their EFL proficiency. TED Talks Storytelling by Akash Karia is reviewed against this backdrop for a course on oral business presentation skills and recommended as a suitable choice for prescribed book.

Keywords

Presentation skills, language proficiency, storytelling, TED talks, idea of the university

Effective, successful communication presupposes that the sender and the receiver are engaged in a co-operative exercise. This is applicable to this book review in two ways. Firstly, the book will be reviewed in terms of the needs and wishes of its users, who are students in their 2nd year of an English Studies programme at a university in Hungary in the first quarter of the 21st century. Secondly, the readers of this text are assumed to be interested in how to select the most appropriate prescribed book for a particular course. The course in question is entitled “Oral Business Presentation Skills”. The book will therefore be reviewed on the basis of the degree to which it is fit for purpose, taking into account several levels of purpose.

Written advice on how to develop presentation skills, be that in the form of a book or website or blog, is easily available, perhaps too easily. The material on offer is overwhelming.
To illustrate this, any google search on “presentation skills, public-speaking” will offer millions of hits. A person seeking to improve their own presentations is spoilt for choice, as is a teacher looking for a text to support their teaching of presentation skills. The range of options means that any prescribed work is not an obvious choice. What the wealth of sources does allow is a nuanced decision that takes into consideration diverse needs, wishes and constraints. In a sense therefore, this book review of TED Talks Storytelling: 23 Storytelling Techniques from the Best TED Talks begins at the end, after the process of research, evaluation, reflection, and decision. What follows is a wide-ranging discussion of what criteria the book should meet in order to be considered suitable, and why these are relevant. After that, the ways in which the book (referred to from here on as TED Talks Storytelling) meets – or fails to fully meet – these criteria will be discussed.

Some of the considerations are very specific and related to the actual situation, curriculum, students and society, others are linked to the great questions of education for which every generation has to find its own answers. The question, what is it that our students study and why? has as its counterpart in the question, What is it that we teach and with what purpose? The simplest answer to this is that we teach them ‘English’ in a very broad sense, and the practical implications of what this means will be discussed later in this review. Before that, let us look at the great questions, to which we arrive, step-by-step, by placing the classroom into a bigger perspective. The simple answer given above is embedded in a conception of what this means and how we do this, which is in turn embedded in a tradition of teaching English at university, which is in turn embedded in an understanding of what a university is and what the point of university studies are. A short detour into the history of our civilisation’s idea of a university will highlight the tension between Humboldtian ideals and a liberal education, on the one hand, and the marketisation of higher education on the other. Two examples from the dominant English-speaking cultures, the United Kingdom and the United States, will serve to illustrate this tension.

The 19th century model of the university, stemming from Germany and becoming the dominant model, focused on the search for an objective, impartial truth and envisaged a holistic combination of teaching and research with a community of scholars and students. In 1963 in the UK, Lord Robbins, an economist commissioned to prepare a report on higher education, outlined four objectives for universities: instruction in skills, promotion of the general powers of the mind leading to cultivated men and women, retention of teaching’s link to the process of discovering and the advancement of learning, and passing on a common culture and associated standards of citizenship (Anderson 2010). Developments in the 1980s
and 1990s in the UK and elsewhere in Europe saw the ending of a binary system of higher education, bringing together the liberal and vocational forms of education. The Bologna Declaration (1988), however, continued to emphasise the mission of the university – as an autonomous institution – as inseparable research and teaching, and the transmission of a common culture in the European Humanist tradition. The subsequent Lisbon Declaration of the European Universities’ Association (2007) reiterates much of this whilst also reflecting a shift towards prioritising economic considerations with its emphasis on employability, meeting the needs of the future labour market and university-enterprise collaboration.

On the other side of the Atlantic, the traditions were somewhat different, but the dilemmas faced were essentially the same. In 1967 the then governor of California Ronald Reagan used the expression “intellectual luxury” to describe some programmes of study and seemed to be of the opinion that taxpayers should not be “subsidizing intellectual curiosity” (qtd Berrett 2015). Not surprisingly, this initiated a lively controversy. A competing vision of the role of the university had slowly been establishing itself, namely that higher education had as its main mission the preparation of its students for working after their studies. This marketized perspective of universities required them to equip their students to earn a good living. The counterpart of this was that research should be economically and socially relevant.

Both schools of thought have, of course, always been present, but the 20th century saw a cumulative shift in the balance towards a more utilitarian understanding that universities will impart skills and qualifications. The careful balancing act between these emphases needs to be continuously re-enacted in the practices of academia, in the programmes offered, in the pedagogical approach, and even in the minutiae of actual course design and teaching.

To further concretise the discussion against the background outlined above, we need to consider the location in a broader sense, the programme, the course, and the students. Location is very relevant because the big divide in BA programmes in English or English Studies is the issue of whether they are offered in a setting where English is the language of the country or not. In the former case, most of the teachers and the students can generally be expected to be native speakers of English, have acquired the language naturally, and have come to the university from their secondary schooling in English. In the latter case, which is pertinent here, the university is located in a country with a different official and dominant language and students have usually learnt English in a formal setting as a foreign language. In our particular case, Hungary is a country in which Russian, for historical reasons, had for many years been the first and compulsory foreign language. This changed rather suddenly from 1989 and today English is the foreign language most commonly chosen in school and a
small percentage of the students may have had the benefit of an early start or a bilingual school. A few may even have spent time in an English-speaking country. The majority are admitted based on the school-leaving exam, which is roughly equivalent to a B2 (CEFR) language certificate. The Bologna process has meant that although some of our students will continue their studies on master’s level, many will immediately look for a job after graduation.

The standard of proficiency has risen in the years since 1989, yet it remains clear that getting a bachelor’s degree in English in Hungary is not the same as getting one in the UK. Much of the content is similar, but there is clearly a heightened need here for language development, and such courses are included throughout the programme. Also, in line with many other European countries, there is a focus on both linguistics and literature. Thus, what is understood by ‘a degree in English’ is different. Despite the high standards we expect of our students, their command of English is not up to that of students of English in the UK or the US. Furthermore, research has shown that in Hungary the main self-reported objective of our students is to develop their communicative competence (Sárdi 2014).

As mentioned above, the B.A. programme includes a variety of language development courses. In the first year, these are aimed at ensuring their general proficiency in English is adequate for their later studies in linguistics and literature. From the second year, the aims include increasing their employability. This means that they take courses in business soft skills, in a form of content and language integrated learning known as “theme-based language instruction” (Brinton, Snow and Wesche 1989). One expected outcome would be for the students to become more fluent in English and able to use business terminology appropriately. Another would be for them to learn about aspects of doing business in English through the medium of English. Native English speaker students with no prior business experience would likewise need to learn this.

The rationale for making this “Oral Business Presentation Skills” one of the courses in this block is that learning the skills of public speaking is useful for a wide range of occupations and can be leveraged in many career paths, whether in academia, business, diplomacy or science. In the globalised world of the early 21st century, being able to present well in English potentially gives our graduates an advantage when they enter the job market. This is likely to remain true even after Brexit and in a world where national borders have once again gained in importance due to the pandemic.

It is against this complex backdrop that we to return to TED Talks Storytelling and the question of why Karia’s book is recommended. This is a short, to-the-point book structured
around TED talks and interwoven with the theme of storytelling. It is not an EFL coursebook, nor does it expect prior experience in presenting. It does not provide a general introduction to presenting, instead it focuses on story-telling within presentations. The author, Akash Karia, is a professional speaker, coach and trainer and this is apparent in the way he combines his own business interests with the material he offers. The book entitles readers to various free resources which can be downloaded from the email he sends and from his website on which a number of related products can be bought. The entrepreneurial attitude and the trainer/coach approach are relevant topics for class discussion and encourages students to apply knowledge on business that they have gained, for example on marketing or motivation. Karia provides help for those wishing to deliver “great”, “captivating”, “powerful” presentations. It looks at TED talks to find out what makes them so successful and to then distil that knowledge into easy-to-apply techniques for general use.

Communicative language teaching stresses the importance of meaningful communication as a means of facilitating language learning. This can be as mundane as discussing timetable changes with students in English, but in the spirit of educating thoughtful students eager to engage with new ideas, it can mean using every opportunity for them to incorporate things they find meaningful and interesting into the classroom discourse. What better way to do this than to use TED talks as a way of illustrating aspects of good presentations? Having gone beyond the original Technology, Entertainment and Design to cover a wide range of topics, TED talks provide students with a choice of topics and presentations to watch and then use as material for their own presentations. TED has as its avowed objective to spread great ideas, make them accessible (through videos available free of charge on ted.com) and generate conversations on them. As a way of fulfilling a wish to learn, of gaining exposure to a variety of ideas and information, and providing meaningful content, TED talks embody many of the ideals of university learning.

The prescribed book uses TED talks in a systematic way, with each chapter using a TED talk to exemplify a point. Links are provided for easy access. The main point around which the book is structured is the suggested “magic ingredient” of TED talks, the one that makes them captivating and inspiring, namely storytelling. In the book, Karia encourages the reader to use stories in their presentations to make these more engaging, inspiring and memorable, and provides assistance on how to craft stories for best effect. By the end, they will have learnt about 23 storytelling principles that can be used immediately and effectively. The book is tightly structured, and each chapter ends in a section entitled “In a nutshell”. Simple but powerful points are stated clearly, explored, linked to practice, and then repeated.
Reflection and experimentation, partly in the classroom, complete the learning process. The language used is straightforward and students will be able to read the book for its content without much difficulty. For more experienced presenters with advanced language ability the book would be too simplistic. But for the intended readers, the uncomplicated yet natural language and the pithy formulations of tips and techniques are an advantage.

The link to practice is provided by the TED talks that are used to illustrate the points – or from which Karia derived those points. The list includes some of the more often viewed TED talks, by well-known experts. This gives students the other ‘magic ingredient’ of TED talks, the passion and authenticity of the speakers. The key messages may strike a chord with the students, since the topics could be relevant to their lives. Chapters 2–8 each focus on one particular aspect of storytelling that can be used to craft compelling stories. Students will be able to make the connection to their own lives, literature they have read or films they have seen. The examples provided and their discussion offer insight and a scaffold enabling a similar approach to be tried.

Specifically:
Chapter Two: “The Story Start” shows how to use a story to ‘hook’ the audience at the outset and draw them into the presentation.
Chapter Three: “The Surprising Element that Makes a Story Irresistible” makes the case for conflict.
Chapter Four: “How to Bring your Characters to Life” gives suggestions on how to allow the audience to visualise characters described.
Chapter Five: “How to Create Mental Motion Pictures for your Audience” stresses the importance of the five senses, which need to be activated in the minds of the audience members.
Chapter Six: “Adding Internal Credibility to your Stories Using Specificity” demonstrates the difference between using vague language and the added vividness of specific language.
Chapter Seven: “The Power of Positive Stories” homes in on inspiring through the emotional high provided by positive-message stories. It also suggests using dialogue rather than narration.
Chapter Eight: “The Spark, the Change and the Takeaway” fleshes out the ideas of the previous chapters culminating in a discussion of how to ensure the key message is put across.
Chapter Nine: “Wrap Up” repeats the 23 techniques and summarises them. A good
concluding discussion can link these to the students’ experience of stories in other settings, including literature.

A “bonus” chapter has been added: a case study examining an entire TED talk. By so doing, the readers are moved into a slightly different phase: rather than focusing on particular, individual tip, a way of analysing a full presentation is provided. Engaging in such analysis during the course allows the students to learn better from each other and to improve their ability to give each other feedback on their performance. This in turn serves to prepare them for a teamwork-based business environment after the completion of their studies.

All in all, this short, inexpensive and easily accessible book (available in print and as an e-book) can be used in many practical ways in a class on presentation skills and can also serve to link to more profound ideas and works.

Works Cited


