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The potential of TED talks for developing prospective United Nations police monitors' listening performance[1]

ABSTRACT
This study investigated the potential effect of using Technology, Entertainment and Design (TED) talks in developing the listening performance of an available sample of 25 Jordanian enrollees in United Nations (UN) police monitors courses. The study follows a one group, pre-/post-test quasi-experimental design. Following a four-week treatment, the data analysis, both quantitative and qualitative, revealed a positive effect for the utilization of TED talks on the participants' listening performance. The participants were further self-reportedly satisfied with the content, method and timing of treatment as well as their motivation, interaction, and overall improvement.
Keywords: listening, TED talks, UN police monitors

1. Introduction and Background

Language is the primary medium of communication, and English is a lingua franca for exchanging ideas and thought all over the world. Even though English is spoken natively by an estimated 5.5% of the world population, it is the most wide-spread among world languages (Simons & Fennig, 2018) as "approximately one in four of the world's population are now capable of communicating to a useful level in English" (Crystal, 2003, p. 69).

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Police not only serve and protect people, fight crimes and handle emergency cases locally, but they also participate in United Nations missions to keep peace around the globe. Peacekeepers from more than one hundred countries are deployed annually to monitor and observe peace processes in post-conflict areas. The Jordanian police are among the earliest participants in preserving peace and security in various conflict areas around the world (Department of Peacekeeping Operations 2018; Petra 2014).

The UN English Language Proficiency Test, a major requirement for participation in UN missions, consists of four sections: reading, listening, report writing, and oral interview. A police officer must pass this test, with a minimum score of 70%, to be deployed on any UN peacekeeping mission.

Most prospective participants in UN missions disqualify for their poor performance in the listening section of the test in which the examinee listens once to an audio script concerning a mission-related topic followed by a related dialogue between two persons. Notes can be taken on both script and dialogue to either answer a set of ten questions or complete a written report.

Based on the first researcher's extensive experience as an instructor in the Jordanian Peacekeeping Institute and a former international UN examiner, these researchers claim that the reasons for poor listening performance are inexperience in listening and note-taking, tension, and poor time management during the test. This is further supported by research findings (e.g., Fang, 2011) that tension is a major deterrent of listening comprehension.

Listening comprehension is defined as the ability to understand native speech at normal speed in an unstructured situation (Chastain, 1971). It encompasses basic auditory recognition, aural grammar, eliciting the necessary information, remembering it, and relating it to the construction of meaning (Morley, 1972). Listening further comprises a process of taking what one hears and organizing it into verbal units to which one can apply meaning (Goss, 1982).

Listening comprehension is more than a process of a unidirectional receipt of speech (Brown, 2001) but rather an essentially collaborative process in which one receives speech, constructs, represents, and negotiates meaning with the speaker, and creates meaning through involvement, imagination and empathy (Rost 2002). In other words, to listen effectively, one must be able to decode the message, and apply a set of meaning-making strategies and interactive processes which entail active involvement, effort, and practice (e.g., Buck, 2001; Dallinger, Jonkmann, Hollm, & Fiege 2016; Harmer, 2001; Shen, Guizhou, Wichura, & Kiattichai 2007).

Listening is a skill of critical significance in all aspects of one's life, especially as a means for language input and a precondition for speaking (Rost, 2005; Valeeva, Aitov, & Bulatbayeva, 2016). Of the four language skills, listening takes up 45% of one's time, more than any other communicative activity and almost

three times as much time as reading (Rankin, 1928) and 57.5% of daily classroom time (Wilt, 1950). Along the same lines, Rivers and Temperley (1978) claimed that adults spend 45% of their communication activities listening, 30% speaking, 16% reading, and 9% writing.

However, even though the teaching of listening has recently gained much interest (e.g., Field, 2002; Nunan, 2002; Schmidt, 2016; Smidt & Hegelheimer, 2004; Wallace, 2010), listening had been the most neglected of the four language skills (Oxford, 1993) so much so that it had been dubbed the „step-child of language learning" (Whiteson, 1974) and the "Cinderella skill" (Nunan, 2002, p. 238) often "overlooked by its elder sister-speaking". Listening comprehension, albeit one of the most difficult tasks for the language learners (Eastman, 1987; Paulston & Bruder, 1976), is the most neglected in the language classroom.

Often, listening instruction is limited to "playing audio and asking compre-hension questions, or even playing audio and asking students to complete tasks" and done more for testing (Brown, 2001, p. 36), introducing grammar or vocabu-lary, discussion, checking comprehension, and introducing different accents than training students to listen more effectively (Thorn, 2009). This matter is further confounded with reports that textbooks generally present listening activities meant more for testing comprehension than teaching listening (Khuziakhmetov & Porchesku, 2016).

However, many argue that, like other language skills, listening may be best learned through listening itself (Renandya & Farrell, 2010), which helps learners acquire vocabulary, recognize accents, and improve pronunciation and speaking, not to mention fosters their motivation (Brown, 2002; Field, 2002; Reinders & Cho, 2010) and independent learning.

Technology has been reported to catalyze language instruction and improve learning (Al-Barakat & Bataineh 2008; Baniabdelrahman, Bataineh, & Bataineh, 2007; Bataineh, Al-Hamad, & Al-Jamal, 2018; Bataineh & Bani Hani, 2011; Bataineh & Baniabdelrahman, 2006; Bataineh & Mayyas, 2017; Hill & Slater, 1998; Ojaili, 2002), develop higher-order thinking, reduce learning time, and increase knowledge retention, through the provision of better access to authentic materials (Field, 2002; Flowerdew & Miller, 2005; Rogers & Medley, 1988).

Even though Technology, Entertainment and Design (TED) talks are a relatively young genre, they have evolved into highly-prepared, perfectly-delivered oral performances with new modes of distribution and new audiences (Ludewig, 2017). TED is a non-profit organization dedicated to spreading ideas, usually in 20-minute segments, known as TED talks.

Ted talks started in 1984 as lectures on technology, entertainment, and design from around the world, but they evolved to cover almost all topics in more than one hundred languages. TED talks have been available to the public since 2006 when TED launched its website and the videos were first published online. Most

talks are accompanied by free transcripts in native and nonnative English and subtitles in over 40 languages (TED, 2018).

TED talks, often compared to academic lectures (e.g., Romanelli, Cain, & McNamara, 2014), have been used in academia since 2006 as "perfectly designed „knowledge snacks" whose delivery is as important as their content" (Ludewig, 2017, p. 7). They have been a growing life-like resource to inspire new forms of language teaching and learning (Nicolle, Britton, Janakiram, & Robichaud, 2014; Romanelli, Cain, & McNamara, 2014). The academic orientation of TED talks has been further established as a growing number of university-based researchers speak about their scholarly expertise making use of academic authentication tools such as research evidence, infographics, and animation. In fact, one in every four TED presenters is an academic expert (Sugimoto & Thelwall, 2013).

Technological capabilities (e.g., subtitling, rate control) have been reported to have positive effects on language learning. For example, Woodall (2010) and Chang and Millett (2014) both reported positive effects on listening comprehension and vocabulary learning. Similarly, TED talks potentially enable learners to control speech rate and, thus, boost their chances for better comprehension (Griffiths, 1992; Wingfield, 2000).

This, coupled with a word-of-mouth accounts that listening is essential not only for enrollment in UN police monitors courses but also for subsequent success in the test and, eventually, participation in UN peace-keeping missions, has instigated this study. The researchers believe that TED talks may be a catalyst for improved listening performance, as learners are afforded opportunities to practice listening (and other skills) in an authentic, non-threatening, and readily accessible medium.

Thus, the research attempts to recognize the potential utility of TED talks for developing prospective UN police monitors' listening. More specifically, it seeks answers to the following questions:

1. What is the effect of TED talks, if any, in developing the listening performance of the participants in United Nations police monitors courses?
2. What are the participants' perceptions of the potential effectiveness of TED talks in developing their listening performance?

The findings of this research are expected to provide grounded insights into the potential utility of TED talks for developing UN police monitors courses' enrollees' listening performance. Since passing the listening section of the UN test is a prerequisite and potential catalyst of UN police monitors courses' enrollees' participation in sought-after peace-keeping missions, the current research is, to the best of these researchers' knowledge, the first to examine the potential utility of TED talks for improving prospective UN peace-keeping personnel's listening performance.

The use of TED talks in language instruction in general, and listening instruction in particular, is still a relatively young field, but evidence abounds

for their effect on improving language proficiency over traditional instruction. Obari and Lambacher (2014) reported a positive effect of TED-based blended learning on Japanese EFL students' overall English proficiency. Similarly, Hye and Kyung (2015) reported that shadowing with authentic materials, such as TED talks, brought about marked improvement in 70 Korean EFL students' listening comprehension.

Takaesu (2013) reported that TED talks improved Japanese college students' listening comprehension, enhanced their motivation to independently pursue their interests, and familiarized them with various English accents. Similarly, Schmidt (2016) found that not only did TED talks and listening journals positively affect the listening skill development, but students viewed them as an interesting and beneficial opportunity for authentic listening practice and a catalyst for real-world listening skills.

The researchers could not locate any previous research on developing UN police officers' listening performance for better execution of their duties on peace-keeping missions. Thus, even though the utility of TED talks themselves is examined most probably for the first time, this study responds to previous recommendations for improving law enforcement officers' language proficiency (e.g., Aldohon, 2014).

In the interest of time and convenience, the scope of this research is limited to the enrollees in the first UN Police Monitor Course for 2018. The research is also limited to a set fifteen TED talks which are relevant to police work, participants' proficiency, and potential interests.

2. Sample, Instrumentation, and Data Collection

The participants comprised an available sample of the 25 police officers enrolled in the international police monitors course held at the Jordanian Peacekeeping Institute in January 2018.

The research used a mixed quantitative and qualitative, one group quasi-experimental design. Three instruments, whose validity and reliability were properly established, were used: a test, a reflection form, and an interview schedule. The test, used as both the pre- and post-test, is adopted from previous UN courses. Additionally, the reflection form and semi-structured interview were designed to gauge the participants' perceptions of the effectiveness of TED talks in developing their listening performance.

In selecting the materials of the treatment, the researchers were keen on varying the difficulty levels of the talks (viz., Carvalho, 2014; Barlow, 2016; Fraser, 2012; Goodman, 2012; Healey, 2013; Boushnak, 2016; Dudani, 2016; Autesserre, 2014; Ebrahim, 2014; Klebold, 2016; Bautista, 2017; Mahmoud, 2016; Bales, 2010; Krishnan, 2009; Lewis, 2011), as the levels of the participants themselves varied considerably. The content of the treatment was graded, which eventually affected

how challenging each talk was to each participant, not to mention that subtitles in both English and Arabic and the option of speech control were available.

3. Findings and Discussion

To answer the first research question, which sought the potential effect of TED talks in developing the listening performance of the participants in United Nations police monitors courses, descriptive statistics were used. Table 1 presents the means and standard deviations of the pre-and post- test scores pertaining to the first research question, which addresses the potential effect of TED talks in developing listening performance.

Table 1. Means and standard deviations of the participants' pre-and post- test scores

Test	Mean	SD	Correlation	Sig	t
pre-	3.68	1.719	.798	.000	12.763
post-	6.44	1.679			

n= 25

Table 1 shows a statically significant difference (at α= 0.05) between the participants' scores on the pre- and post-tests. The participants' listening comprehension have significantly improved, which may be attributed to the treatment.

The researchers argue that the use of TED talks has created a context through which the participants were exposed to UN- and police-related topics under the watchful eye of the instructor/ first researcher. In the first activity, the participants watched the talk (without subtitles) and took notes. Not only does this allow the participants to practice listening, but it also gives them a chance to practice note-taking, which replicates what test-takers do on the official UN test. In the second attempt, the participants watched the same talk with English subtitles, which not only affords them more linguistic support but also allows them to monitor their comprehension and focus on the information they missed in the same round. In the third attempt, the participants watched the talks with Arabic subtitles, which enabled them to both verify information and check their comprehension over the three attempts.

In one of the activities, which aims at developing decoding and careful listening, the participants were taught to create cloze passages using Cloze Test Creator, through which each participant removes words either at random or by choice, to practice and test his comprehension.

Following each set of activities, the participants reflected on their experience, paying special attention to their strengths and areas which warrant further practice in both listening and note-taking. The participants reported not only improved comprehension and note-taking but also more confidence in their respective abilities.

The participants reportedly found that the talks, with the added features of subtitles, speed adjustment, relevant topics, and clarity of message delivery, relatively easy to understand and process and, eventually, developed their listening and note-taking. The researchers argue that the appropriate level and content of the teaching material served as a catalyst for improving the participants' listening and note-taking skills, which is consistent with previous research findings (e.g., Buck, 2001; Dallinger et al., 2016; Harmer, 2001) which assert that appropriate content is a catalyst for listening development.

Furthermore, the fact that the treatment was tailored to the participants' particular needs, gleaned by the instructor/first researcher over years of being an instructor and examiner, may have contributed to its effectiveness in developing listening and note-taking skills. The fact that the course was taught by an expert in UN testing may have also reflected on the participants' keenness to participate more actively and diligently in the program, which may have eventually affected their performance on the post-test.

The current findings are consistent with those of previous research (e.g., Hye & Kyung, 2015; Ludewig, 2017; Nicolle et al., 2014; Romanelli et al., 2014; Sugimoto & Thelwall, 2013; Takaesu, 2013) which add to the evidence on the positive effect of TED talks in developing EFL listening performance.

The second research question sought the participants' perceptions of the effectiveness of TED talks in developing their listening performance. The participants reported that the treatment had a significant effect on improving their listening performance. The findings revealed that the participants were highly satisfied with the content of the treatment. Not only were they exposed to short, concise, and highly contextualized segments, but they were also impressed with the novelty and visual appeal of the content. Fifteen (60%) of the participants *strongly agreed* and nine (36%) *agreed* that the content of TED talks is not only appropriate but also relevant to their needs. This almost unanimous satisfaction may be attributed to the researchers' choice of talks with relevant content to UN missions and police monitors' work.

Similarly, eleven (44%) of the participants *strongly agreed* and 12 (48%) *agreed* that each of the 15 TED talks used in the treatment has a clear and succinct message. The participants reported that the talks were a rich source of vocabulary (e.g., drugs, violence, cybercrime) and that the rich context provided by each talk facilitated learning police-related terms such as *lane, velocity, dead stop, slammed on brakes, the air bag deployed,* and *the car is totaled* (see Healey, 2013). The participants' reported that the treatment afforded them opportunities not only to watch relevant, yet very interesting, talks but also to enrich their police-related vocabulary and improve their listening performance.

Twelve (48%) of the participants *strongly agreed* and twelve (48%) *agreed* that the treatment catalyzed their self-study and independent learning beyond the

classroom. This, coupled with reports by most of the participants (88%) that the comprehensibility of the content of the treatment helped them not only enjoy learning but also build and foster their confidence in their ability and motivation to learn, which may have contributed to their much-improved listening performance. The researchers observed that the way the participants engaged in the listening activities and responded to the reflection questions on each talk, by merit of their notes rather than the transcript, has prompted them towards diligence and further learning.

The participants also reflected on the merit of bi-lingual subtitles in facilitating their listening comprehension. The English subtitles reportedly not only gave the participants more linguistic support but also allowed them to monitor their comprehension and focus on details whereas the Arabic subtitles enabled them to check their understanding and make connections between their first and target languages. These findings are consistent with research evidence (e.g., Hosogoshi, 2016) on the merit of subtitles as potential scaffolds for learning.

Similarly, the participants reported on the utility of the speed control option in developing their listening ability through practice customized to their own level and pace of learning. Most reported that, at the early stages of the treatment, they often repeated the talks at slower speed to better grasp the ideas and difficult vocabulary, increasing the speech rate as they made progress. This is consistent with substantial research evidence (e.g., Fushun, 2006; Robinson, Stefrling, Skinner, & Robinson, 1997) on the facilitative effect of speech rate on developing second language listening comprehension. Along the same lines, the multiple accents in the TED talks used in the treatment provided the participants with a slice of reality with both native and non-native accent, which would improve their chances of listening comprehension and, in turn, of passing the listening component of the UN test.

The participants also reflected on the merit of the hands-on note-taking practice on improving their ability to take notes, attend to details, and, eventually, better comprehend the talks. Note-taking is rudimentary for passing police monitors courses, as a good set of notes is crucial for preparing for the listening component of the UN test.

As note-taking and listening comprehension are interdependent skills, the more details covered, the more is understood of the script. Through practicing listening to TED talks, the participants' listening skill improved as they became more familiar not only with the format and structure of the talks but also with police-related terminology and phrases (delivered with correct pronunciation and various accents) which, in turn, facilitated listening comprehension. With frequent practice, the participants became more selective and had a better eye for key concepts, repetitions (signaling important detail), and verbal cues (e.g., changes in tone, pitch, and speed, signaling emphasis or important information), abbreviations, acronyms, and symbols.

Furthermore, repeated exposure to TED talks potentially reduced tension and created a relaxed, non-threatening atmosphere, as the participants practiced listening and note-taking and, simultaneously, practiced test-taking and time-management. 28% of the participants *strongly agreed,* and 64% *agreed* that they no longer experienced panic after practicing with TED talks.

Overall, the participants were in near-consensus that the TED-based treatment has significantly improved their listening performance, self-confidence, and motivation to learn. Their positive assessment may be attributed to a host of factors, most prominent amongst which is the novelty of the treatment, as most of the participants reported experiencing TED talks for the first time. The unlimited exposure to the talks and the self-regulated use (with variations in exposure, speed, and bi-lingual subtitles) may also have catalyzed the participants' engagement and time-on-task inside and outside the classroom, which is consistent with previous findings (e.g., Li, Chang, Chu, & Tsai, 2012; Schmidt, 2016) that individualized learning environments are catalysts for learner satisfaction, achievement, interest, and motivation.

4. Implications and Recommendations

This study reports a positive effect for TED talks on prospective UN police monitors' listening performance and overall participant satisfaction with the treatment. The researchers call upon EFL instructors in the Jordanian Peacekeeping Institute to focus more on teaching listening to improve learners' performance.

The extensive review of related literature pointed out the relative dearth of research on listening instruction. More research is needed not only on the difficulties encountered by EFL learners but also on effective remediation strategies.

Based on the findings of the research, it is crucial that teachers be made aware of the utility of TED talks for improving learners' listening performance in the foreign language classroom and beyond. The researchers recommend that Jordanian EFL teachers be trained to incorporate TED talks in their instructional practices.

Due to the limit of time and space, the current study only lasted for four weeks. Therefore, research, carried out for a longer interim, may generate more readily verifiable findings.

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