

Exploring EFL Learners' Experiences in Developing Speaking Skills through TED Talks: A Narrative Inquiry

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Abstract: English as a foreign language (EFL) learners are often faced with few opportunities to learn English meaningfully at work or university. Nevertheless, technological growth provides EFL learners with diverse media to acquire knowledge everywhere, supporting the development of English skills, particularly speaking skills. This qualitative study explores how TED Talks, as a medium, can support an EFL learner in enhancing her speaking skills. This research was conducted over 14 weeks using Narrative Inquiry as the method and was guided by a professional ELT teacher. The learning scenarios covered information from the TED Talks videos, selected according to the CEFR framework, which covered descriptors and speaking skills activities, including 3 Sustained Monologues: Describing Experience, Giving Information, and Putting a Case. The findings showed that the media contributes to the development of learners' speaking skills from A1 to B1 levels, especially in comprehension, fluency, and vocabulary, with a total of 119 new vocabulary words. This study offers practical insights for EFL learners and teachers on how media helped learners' speaking skills development. However, limited research has focused on developing speaking skills through TED Talks, highlighting the need for deeper exploration of overall production activities within the CEFR guidelines.

Keywords: EFL learners, Narrative Inquiry, Speaking skills, TED Talks

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, there has been increasing interest in media as a source of learning materials, particularly TED Talks. TED Talks stands for “Technology, Entertainment, and Design” and refers to a media platform that offers free video-based learning (Kusumastuty et al., 2019). TED Talks annually feature speakers who present coherent ideas on limited topics, driven by public interest, and have expanded over the past few years to include a wider range of topics (Izzah et al., 2020). It has grown in recent years into diverse subjects that raise public

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concern, especially in education (Nursafira, 2020). Recent evidence suggests that TED Talks have the potential to change how people nowadays learn in open spaces and to serve as a media platform that provides learning experiences that support the development of speaking, with the involvement of technology (Syafrizal & Syamsun, 2023).

The use of technology has shown potential to provide authentic media resources, offering learners exposure to the spoken discourse of people sharing their knowledge and meaningful experiences, thereby supporting both spoken reception and speaking skills (Anderson, 2017). TED Talks, as a powerful resource in ELT, give learners real examples of how English is used in everyday situations, support them in organizing their thoughts, building arguments, and expressing ideas clearly, covering all the important parts of effective speaking production (Fitria, 2022). Accordingly, these factors guide learners in using TED Talks as an English learning tool, particularly for the speaking skills of English by foreign language learners, in ways that align with their own interests and experiences.

Although speaking skills are considered important, learning experiences are limited to classroom settings at several schools and universities that major in English. Other foreign learners consider speaking skills a challenging task for teachers because English is still considered a foreign language in Indonesia (Nursafira, 2020). Regardless of the foreign language's title, English has predominantly been used, especially in formal settings, thereby improving its status and establishing it as the language of instruction (Alrajafi, 2021). Existing research has highlighted the transformative potential of technology enhancements in language learning, thereby offering opportunities for meaningful use of the English language (Karim et al., 2022). Simultaneously, technology and media are integrating into education, gaining the potential to improve student engagement and provide an authentic approach to language resources (Abe & Jordan, 2013). Hence, the intersection between evolving technology and the growing educational landscape is important to highlight.

Nonetheless, those two intersecting trends between technology and educational landscapes are promising; however, previous research also stated that, to become more effective in the learners' development of speaking skills, this implementation of using media needs professionals to give the best guidance in their learning experiences in speaking skills. The existing literature has mainly analysed the incorporation of media TED Talks, without emphasizing the Common European Framework (CEFR) scale of speaking skills activities and descriptors. In addition, CEFR provides a globally recognized standard for measuring language proficiency, applicable across diverse languages, including in Indonesia (Zaki & Darmi, 2021). This framework offers a clear, consistent, and comprehensive basis for curriculum design, resource development, and assessment. It helps EFL learners to track their progress through their learning. Usually, the existing literature doesn't show the CEFR range, which consists of 6 levels: A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, and the highest is C2. These rankings are also known as beginner for A1 and A2, intermediate for B1 and B2, and advanced for C1 and C2.

To fill this gap, this present narrative inquiry aims to explore how media, namely TED Talks, can support the learners' progress in speaking skills. The speaking skills activities were aligned with the CEFR framework, which covered descriptors and activities such as 3 Sustained Monologues: Describing Experience, Giving Information, and Putting a Case. The

learner also used data collection procedures, including learning scenarios, an observation checklist, and self-video recordings, to track the development of speaking skills within the CEFR framework and the descriptors for each scale. Also, the study focuses on the five core elements of speaking (Hughes, 2003): comprehension, grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and fluency. Therefore, the research question is: How does the use of TED Talks as a medium contribute to the development of speaking skills for an EFL learner from CEFR level A1 to B1?

METHOD

A. Research Design

This study adopted a Narrative Inquiry design to explore the learner's developmental journey in English speaking skills. Narrative inquiry was first introduced in 1990 as a study of how humans experience the world (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Narrative inquiry has been shown to be beneficial in elaborating the complexity of personal experience and offering a more complete and thorough comprehension from the perspective of those involved (Han, 2025). As a qualitative approach, narrative inquiry enabled the researcher to capture the learner's experiences, reflections, and responses throughout the learning process.

B. Research Instrument

The instruments used in this study consisted of learning scenarios, observation checklists, self-video recordings, and an interview with the English teacher. These instruments provided rich data for tracing the learner's progress, documenting classroom interactions, and revealing the learner's perceptions of feedback and learning experiences. The study involved one participant. Therefore, the researcher explored the learner's personal experiences and narratives through the collected data and sought feedback from an ELT expert.

C. Technique of Data Collection and Data Analysis

Following the narrative inquiry, Farrell's reflective framework was used to ensure the transparent and reflective interpretation of the study. The framework for reflecting on practice has five levels: philosophy, principles, theory, practice, and beyond practice (Farrell & Kennedy, 2019). These five levels support the reflective narrative inquiry throughout the research process. First, at the philosophical level, the researcher used this stage as an undercurrent, indicating that professional practice occurs both inside and outside the classroom. The professional teacher also guided the researcher to share our English learning experiences from the very beginning. Second, at the principles level, the reflection focused on the academic concept and on approaches to learning and decision-making under relaxed, stress-free learning conditions. Third, at the theoretical level, the researcher connected the theories to practice by examining how learners' learning behaviours were explored through theories of language acquisition, namely storytelling and communicative practices. Fourth, at the practice level, the experiences are integrated into the CEFR framework of speaking skills activities, for example, describing experiences using the narrative text. Eventually, the fifth and final level, beyond practice, explored a broader concept of reflection that includes

the sociocultural dimension, the culture of using new media and technology, teachers' and peers' roles, and daily activities, which can also lead to a wide range of learning opportunities.

Through the Narrative Inquiry approach, the learner's trajectory was examined not only in terms of linguistic gains but also in terms of engagement, confidence, and communicative effectiveness. The data revealed consistent growth across Hughes's (2003) five speaking components, including comprehension, grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and fluency, which became increasingly evident as the learner engaged with CEFR-based TED Talk activities. The EFL learner also refers to Scrivener's Learning Teaching approach, which is rooted in communicative and student-centred principles (Scrivener, 1994) and emphasizes engaging learners in meaningful activities and focusing on the practical aspects of language learning, which aligns well with beginner- to intermediate-level learners.

RESULTS

The results in this study revealed that the use of TED talks contributed to the development of the learner's speaking skills from CEFR level A1 to B1. According to the official CEFR website, A1 level is a basic ability to communicate and exchange information in a simple way, e.g., asking simple questions about a menu and understanding simple answers. A2 level is the ability to deal with simple, straightforward information and to begin to express oneself in familiar contexts, e.g., can take part in a routine conversation on simple, predictable topics. B1 level is the ability to express oneself in a limited way in familiar situations and to deal in a general way with non-routine information, e.g., ask to open an account at a bank, provided that the procedure is straightforward (Exam English Ltd, 2026).

Three major findings appeared from the study: (1) Improvement in speaking skills, (2) expansion of vocabulary repertoire, and (3) increased learner engagement and confidence. These results were identified through the analysis of learning scenarios, observation checklists, and self-video recordings collected over the 14-week learning period.

Table 1. Summary of Research Findings

Data Source	CEFR Level	Summary
Learning Scenarios, Observation Checklists, and Self-Video Recordings	A1	The learner demonstrated basic listening and speaking skills, understanding simple information on familiar topics and communicating in short, practiced sentences. Their speaking focused on familiar experiences, using basic words and simple sentences. For example, the basic vocabulary she used included: introduce, welcome, enjoy, celebration, experience, future, improve, and community. The simple sentences produced by the participants were: "Today, I would like to introduce my classmate." "She is a hardworking and friendly student.", and "I enjoy learning new things with my friends."

Data Source	CEFR Level	Summary
Learning Scenarios, Observation Checklists, and Self-Video Recordings	A2	The learner improved in understanding clear spoken information and speaking in longer sentences. They could give short presentations, answer simple follow-up questions, and briefly explain their opinions and experiences. The learner also became more confident and used a wider range of vocabulary. For example, the basic vocabulary she used was: hobby, experience, activity, routine, exercises, and health. The simple sentences produced by the participants, “Healthy habits are important for our daily lives.” “I try to exercise three times a week.” “I believe exercise is important because it improves our health.” or the simple follow-up questions like, “Why do you think exercise is important?”, “I think exercise is important because it keeps our body healthy and gives us more energy for daily activities.
Learning Scenarios, Observation Checklists, and Self-Video Recordings	B1	The learner could understand the main ideas in longer conversations and could share opinions, explain ideas, and give organized presentations. Their speech became fluent and clear, with better pronunciation, a wider vocabulary, and stronger communication skills. For example, the vocabulary she used was opinion, reason, because, education, responsibility, presentation, and topic. The sentences produced by the participants were “In my opinion, students should read more books.” “Learning English is useful because it helps us communicate internationally.”, and “Good morning. Today’s meeting will begin at 9 a.m. Our environmental project will take place next Saturday.” Or “Today, I would like to talk about healthy lifestyles. There are three main reasons why this topic is important. First, it helps people improve their quality of life. Then, it encourages personal growth. Finally, it creates positive changes in the community. Thank you for listening.”
Overall Findings	A1-B1 Progression	Over the 14-week program, the learner’s speaking skills grew from A1 to B1 level. By listening to TED Talks and practicing speaking regularly, the learner went from saying short sentences of about 30 to 45 words to giving longer talks of over 180 words, and gained a total of 119 new vocabulary words. There were clear improvements in understanding, grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, fluency, confidence, and independent communication.

DISCUSSION

This study highlights three findings, which include the improvement in speaking skills, expansion of vocabulary repertoire, and learner engagement and confidence building.

A. Improvement in Speaking Skills

The findings of this study focused on the consistent use of TED Talks, which contributed to the development of English language learners' oral production competencies. This development was carried out by examining speaking skills using the CEFR framework. Clear changes were observed in learners' progression from level A1 (basic) to B1 (intermediate), which comprises five core components of speaking: comprehension, grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and fluency (Hughes, 2003). Related research also revealed that using TED Talks as a learning tool can enhance spoken language acquisition and improve learners' communicative competence (Choi & Nunan, 2018).

The learning scenarios demonstrated that using narrative videos helped learners decipher longer, more complex spoken discourse. This development was facilitated by watching TED Talk videos and practicing speaking activities based on them. During the video-based activities, learners demonstrated increased understanding of main ideas and more detailed information, which aligns with findings that exposure to natural spoken English aids listening comprehension and subsequent spoken output (Goh & Vandergrift, 2021).

Grammar and fluency were also affected. Narrative research showed that after repeated exposure and practice using TED Talks, learners began producing longer utterances with more accurate grammatical structures. This finding mirrors research by Polat & Erİştİ, (2019), which demonstrated that authentic multimedia texts support the internalization of structures and the development of fluency. However, grammatical gains were less significant because the learning from TED Talks was not focused on that. The medium emphasized speaking fluency and the effective communication of meaning in each topic.

Learners' pronunciation improved in stress, intonation, and rhythmic patterns, as evidenced by self-recorded videos. These changes are supported by studies showing that incorporating audio-visual media into the learning process can increase phonological awareness and provide models of natural speech patterns (Bărbuleț, 2023).

B. Expansion of Vocabulary Repertoire

This study revealed an increase of 119 new vocabulary words through exposure to TED Talks selected according to CEFR descriptors. Vocabulary growth is widely recognized as a key factor in improving oral production, as a richer lexicon enables learners to express ideas more effectively, organize content, and engage in more complex oral tasks (Nation, 2022). Learners' vocabulary acquisition was evident in topics aligned with the TED Talk themes, such as sustainability, personal experiences, technology, and social issues. Topics were selected based on learning requirements according to the scale. When exploring position A1, learners would focus on descriptors in the CEFR Descriptors for speaking skills, and so on. This vocabulary gain is an accumulation from A1 to B1, with each vocabulary word corresponding to a specific CEFR descriptor level. Recent SLA research confirms that

incidental learning through authentic, context-rich media is highly effective for vocabulary acquisition because learners encounter words in meaningful communicative contexts rather than isolated lists (Webb & Nation, 2017).

The observation checklist showed that the new vocabulary function facilitated better performance in the three CEFR-based speaking activities used in this study: describing experiences, providing information, and presenting arguments (Council of Europe, 2020). However, this vocabulary addition was limited to the few videos watched and could continue to develop as students progress to the next level.

C. Learner Engagement and Confidence Building

Another important finding is that the use of TED Talks has significantly increased learner engagement and confidence in oral production. Narrative data revealed that learners felt more motivated and personally connected when working with content that was meaningful, interesting, and relevant to their life experiences. This finding aligns with research showing that motivation and affective engagement play a crucial role in second language production. Gardner (2007) states that narrative experiences are highly correlated with learners' relevant experience, thereby making them meaningful.

Self-video recordings indicate that learners can begin to experiment with more expressive delivery styles, greater risk-taking, and longer communications. This echoes findings from a recent study on learner autonomy and digital media, where visual exposure to authentic speech helps learners internalize communication strategies and reduce anxiety (Godwin-Jones, 2021).

Furthermore, gradual, ongoing feedback from instructors can facilitate comparisons of learners' oral production before and after using the TED Talk model, thereby fostering learners' self-efficacy and reflective practice. Research supports that guided reflection and media-supported feedback are powerful motivators and contribute to increased learner agency (Thu, 2020). Therefore, the media can play an active role by incorporating learners' feedback.

The findings of this study align with recent research confirming the value of authentic audio-visual media in developing second-language (L2) or foreign-language speaking skills. Using authentic multimedia, such as TED Talks, provides contextual language input that closely resembles natural communication outside the classroom (Goh & Vandergrift, 2021; Bărbuleț, 2023). The documented progress of learners from A1 to B1 aligns with research showing that sustained language exposure can foster support for meaningful language acquisition, especially for everyday use. The findings also align with the descriptors contained in the CEFR, which demonstrate how points on each scale can help learners apply their learning outcomes.

Furthermore, this research contributes to recent claims that technology-mediated learning increases learner motivation and participation (Choi & Nunan, 2018; Godwin-Jones, 2021). The use of guided reflection and self-recording videos aligns with pedagogical recommendations for blended learning that encourage independent practice and multimodal reflection (Thu, 2020).

However, this research also highlights that while TED Talks are effective as input and models, they should be complemented with guided activities (e.g., structured speaking tasks and reflective prompts) to support learner development, particularly when aligned with the CEFR descriptors. Research by Polat & Erİştİ (2019) revealed a gap in narrative learning, where expert guidance and support are lacking during the learning process. Providing expert guidance during the learning process can mitigate potential biases.

D. Farrell's Five Level Reflective Framework

Through the three highlights of the study, which include the Improvement in speaking skills, Expansion of vocabulary repertoire, and Learner engagement and confidence building, the researchers' reflection was also guided by Farrell's five-level framework that helps shape learners to make responsive learning decisions.

The first level, philosophy, is grounded in the belief that setting achievable goals and pursuing them to completion requires an understanding of the learner (Farrell & Kennedy, 2019). It was observed that these values fostered a sense of curiosity and self-improvement in the learner. In this research, the EFL learner learns by exploring media and content they enjoy.

Second, at the principles level in Farrell's framework, it is noted that it's important to teach them differently depending on the situation. In this study, the learner has the freedom to have her own reflection time through her learning scenarios at each CEFR level and to choose her own material, as long as it remains connected to the spoken reception and speaking skills characterizations stated by CEFR, as mentioned in the table above.

Third, at the theoretical level, Farrell's framework is divided into two parts: teaching methodology and planning procedures. There's also a distinction between the task-based approaches and the other traditional structural approaches. This is also because Farrell's framework used the constructivist approach in ELT. Then, the second part is planning procedures. The planning refers to the one that is not bound to extensive plans. In this study, the EFL learner used a task-based approach each week with only a 14-week plan. It focuses on learning material only for spoken reception and speaking skills.

Fourth, practice level, this level refers to the actual practice the EFL learners did in accordance with levelling up her English spoken skills. This practice requires observation and recorded practice lessons, guided by an ELT expert. The instructional lessons for EFL learners will also be followed up by an adjustment from the expert in response to the learners' reflections and her own observations.

Fifth, beyond the practice level, in the Indonesian EFL context, learners are also encouraged to learn outside the classroom and after the assessment. It creates a continuation of learning to develop her spoken English skills to the next level. It includes learning from anywhere, finding constraints to solve problems, developing critical thinking, and a supportive environment that shapes broader opportunities.

These reflections help strengthen the narrative inquiry's credibility by aligning the process and progress and explaining the connections among all requirements included in the learning experiences, such as the CEFR level, the reflection framework, English media, and continuous guidance from the ELT teacher and expert.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to explore how the use of the TED Talks YouTube Channel as authentic media contributes to the development of EFL learners' speaking skills, particularly from CEFR level A1 to B1, through a narrative inquiry approach and using the Farrell Framework. Drawing on learning scenarios, observation checklists, and self-video recordings over a 14-week period, the findings indicate that TED Talks can effectively support the development of speaking skills when implemented with pedagogical guidance and aligned with CEFR descriptors.

The results demonstrate that the consistent influence of TED Talks led to noticeable improvement in the learner's speaking skills across the five components of speaking, namely comprehension, grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and fluency, as stated by Hughes in 2003. The application of the Farrell framework showed that among these components, the most substantial development was observed in vocabulary, comprehension, and pronunciation, as evidenced by longer speech production, improved coherence, and increased lexical range. The learner's progression from A1 to B1 level suggests that authentic audio-visual input, when combined with structured speaking tasks, can promote meaningful language use beyond basic sentence-level production.

In addition, this study found that TED Talks contributed significantly to vocabulary acquisition, with the learner gaining 119 new lexical items throughout the learning process. This vocabulary growth played a crucial role in enabling the learner to perform the three CEFR-aligned speaking skills activities, describing experience, giving information, and putting a case, with increasing confidence and complexity.

This study offers practical recommendations for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction. The findings suggest that integrating authentic media, such as TED Talks, into speaking lessons exposes learners to valuable language input and facilitates the development of speaking skills in accordance with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). Furthermore, implementing guided reflection, self-recording, and structured speaking tasks can promote greater learner autonomy and confidence.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The research was conducted with a single participant and employed a limited selection of TED Talks over a 14-week period. As a result, the findings may not be generalizable to all EFL learners or instructional contexts. Future research should incorporate larger samples of learners, longer study durations, and a broader range of proficiency levels to more thoroughly examine the impact of TED Talks on speaking skill development. Additional studies could also explore various CEFR-aligned speaking activities or compare the effectiveness of TED Talks with other types of digital media.

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