How to Deliver a TED Talk

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TED talks are a useful way to stimulate critical thinking skills and help generate discussions in the classroom, but there is another very intriguing use for the videos at ted.com; learning about presentation skills. How to Deliver a TED Talk is based on an analysis of the best TED talks and has more than 100 tips for potential presenters. Although this book is specifically aimed at helping people deliver a Ted talk, it also serves as a very useful presentation guide or reference book for upper-intermediate to advanced level EFL or ESL students.

While history has clearly been shaped by important speeches (Abbott, 2012), being able to present effectively is also important for university students, those learning English (Zappa-Hollman, 2007), and educators (Pittenger, Miller & Mott, 2004) alike. Although this book is not specifically written for English language learners, it is still very suitable for high intermediate level Japanese university students. It is comprised of four parts: content, delivery, design, and the journey to the stage and beyond (how to get selected for TED talks—this part may not be applicable for your students). One interesting example is chapter 4 of the content section, detailing how to craft a catchphrase with just three words. The phrase “yes we can” is the most obvious example given, but others are provided as well, such as “start with why.” It then goes further, showing how good speakers make these phrases action centric and rhythmic, and how they often repeat the catchphrase at least three times during the presentation. Chapter 10 of the delivery part is also interesting as it deals with how to add humor to your presentation. Suggestions include using elements of surprise, an emotional release, or self-deprecation. He adds that effective speakers usually pause and stay in character after delivering the punch line, while warning against using any form of humor based on a sense of superiority. What is particularly good is that with each presentation tip, specific examples from TED talks and other famous speeches are given. In addition, Internet support is provided through links to speeches so you can view for yourself or show your students.

This book can be used as a reference book for oral presentation skills or it can be utilized in the classroom. One way to use it is by assigning certain relevant chapters to be read for homework. Students can focus on specific aspects of presenting, and then watch the related talks either at home or in the classroom. They can also refer back to the book at a later date to further examine certain key features of presentations.

The real strength of this book lies in the numerous authentic examples of TED talks that it provides for each tip. One such example is a list of different ways to end a presentation (p. 105), based on ten popular TED speakers. Chapter 3 focuses on how TED speakers use personal anecdotes in their presentation, and how this can be manipulated to achieve different outcomes. There are also many specific examples of what NOT to do, as in start with a clichéd opening (p. 93). By providing links to actual TED talks, the book brings a sense of realism to each point and shows readers how actual speakers deliver presentations effectively. It was also refreshing to use a presentation book which actively discourages the overuse of visuals and stresses the relative importance of language, delivery, and content instead. Developing a presence and the ability to communicate and interact with the audience without relying on visuals should form the basis of learning how to conduct a presentation.

There are a few caveats that need mentioning though. Firstly, this book is not written with a Japanese audience in mind. It is also not designed for classroom use specifically, so teachers need to adapt the contents accordingly. The book also does not come with any extra features or materials. While links to all the mentioned TED talks are listed in the back, teachers and students will need online access to view them.

Overall though, I have no hesitation in recommending this book. I found it unique and useful, both in terms of its focus, and in the detail of its content. It provides a sense of realism and depth of detail that most ESL or EFL textbooks and presentation how to textbooks are lacking.

References
Imagine yourself speaking at the global TED Talks conference in front of millions of viewers. Or imagine that every time you speak, audience members come up to you and say "your speech is so good, you should deliver a TED Talk." TED has become the gold standard of speakers and thinkers around the globe. If you'd like to speak at TED you need to know how to deliver captivating ideas in a provocative manner. It's not enough to have the research or to just be "smart." TED demands excellence in the substance and style of your presentation. This course will teach you h...