Gongyeh App: EFL students' Voices from Hong Kong

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Abstract: This study examines the experiences of university EFL students preparing and evaluating oral presentations via the Gongyeh App, an online presentation assessment platform devised by an EMI university in Hong Kong. A key goal of the App is to enhance students' presentation skills by providing audience feedback so that maximizing learning effectiveness can take place. The present study was guided by the following questions: 1. What were students' attitudes and beliefs concerning the application of the Gongyeh App? 2. Does the Gongyeh App improve students' oral presentations compared to a teacher-centered approach? A total of 12 university EFL students participated in this study, which took the form of in-depth semi-structured interviews. Based on the data, it is revealed which learning support the students feel is most pragmatic and useful for overcoming the challenges of giving feedback on oral presentations. The article will end with the author sharing his insightful reflections on the necessity of further support for students in providing professional oral presentation feedback.

Keywords: Gongyeh App, oral presentation, peer feedback, assessment

1. Introduction

It is commonplace in tertiary education settings throughout the world to deliver oral presentations. Tsang (2020) pinpointed that all subject disciplines utilize presentations as a means of assessing students' knowledge and assisting them in acquiring relevant skills. Presenting effectively is an essential skill that can still be employed after graduation in a variety of circumstances such as job interviews and assignments in the workplace (Tsang, 2020). Generally, tertiary-level students need presentation skills to be competitive worldwide in the 21st century, which falls under the communication skills category. Presentation constitutes a major part of the academic experience for many students in higher education and is "inherently associated with a person's future career path" (Elliott & Higgins, 2005).

In the process of teaching and learning in the classroom, there is often a very strong emphasis on developing oral presentation skills, which can be seen in the fact that students are regularly required to present their ideas, arguments, opinions, and research results either individually or in groups throughout the study. As a result of all these activities, students will be able to improve their oral presentation skills, which will help them when they graduate and start working as professionals in the future. It remains a matter of concern that students do not have effective oral presentation skills; complaints about graduates' poor presentation skills persist. In contrast to the standards of good oral communication perceived by the industry (Jackson, 2014), graduates tend to rate their oral communication skills highly (Jackson, 2014). The disparity in communication standards has prompted previous studies to call for more preparation for oral presentations among undergraduates and clearer communication expectations among industry stakeholders (DuPre & Williams, 2011). Today, university students and graduates are required to have the ability to present an English presentation to a public audience, and some of them

are even obligated to perform that presentation in English (DuPre & Williams, 2011; Heron, 2019; Jackson, 2014).

Currently, there are a considerable amount of studies relating to self-evaluation, teachers' feedback, peer feedback and the comparison of these (e.g., Barry, 2012; De Grez et al., 2012; Murphy & Barry, 2016; Reitmeier & Vrchota, 2009; Yamkate & Intratat, 2012); however, it remains relatively understudied how presentations can be assessed (e.g., Babaii et al., 2016; De Grez et al., 2012). Studies on pedagogical issues, such as teaching and improving presentation skills, are even rarer. While traditional teachers' and peer feedback for evaluating presentations are plentiful, a lack of research has been conducted on how online peer feedback from educational technological tool contributes to successful presentations and how to address learners' delivery problems and enhance presentation skills, particularly during and in the post COVID-19 landscape. The purpose of this research is to shed light on the implementation and the importance of the online peer review technological tool, Gongyeh App, which contributes to successful presentations. This study is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1.   What were students' attitudes and beliefs concerning the application of the Gongyeh App?

RQ2.   Does the Gongyeh App improve students' oral presentations compared to a teacher-centred approach?

1.1 Teaching Context

The study examined the learning experiences of first-year students at an EMI University in Hong Kong, including the study of Design, Physiotherapy, Optometry, Mechanical Engineering, Nursing, Land Surveying, Accounting, and Chinese Bilingual Studies. All students in these disciplines are required to complete two-credit courses in English for Academic Purposes (EAPs) in both Year 1 and 2.

The EAP module is being offered for thirteen weeks in the post-COVID-19 landscape, for three hours each week. Two written assignments have to be completed to pass this module, which include a first draft and a second draft of a problem-solution essay, along with a video presentation that had to be recorded beforehand. A key objective of this course is to assist students in enhancing and developing their proficiency in the English language in a safe and supportive learning environment within the University, as well as to help students study efficiently within the English language learning environment.

There were approximately 1600 students enrolled in this course at the time of the study. Groups of students were assigned based on the course timetabling and management needs of their host departments, according to the profile of the students. This course's learning outcomes include (a) analyzing and practicing elements of academic writing, such as word choice, hedging devices, and register; (b) developing an idea much more smoothly and understanding the common pattern and elements that make up a problem-solution essay and an argumentative essay; (d) summing up and paraphrasing; and (e) identifying the elements, structure, and tone of academic presentations.

1.2 Reason for the Innovation

Through the semester-end feedback questionnaire, participants taking the same EAP course in previous cohorts expressed disappointment in their limited opportunities to conduct presentations using online tools such as Blackboard, Microsoft Teams, and Zoom. Additionally, they expressed that they had received very little oral feedback from their classmates and teachers during COVID-19 online classes. The students also faced challenges when it came to learning and being evaluated on their oral presentation skills. Using online platforms for assessment purposes is one of the challenges students encounter. In a study conducted by Mu'awanah et al. (2021), several challenges were identified related to the use of Zoom for supporting English language learning. These challenges included a general lack of confidence when students are asked for clarifications by the teachers and a delayed response. Moreover, students stated that individuals are incapable of accurately presenting themselves online due

to the lack of paralinguistic cues (Moorhouse, 2020). With such challenges in mind, I, as a teacher, began considering innovations as a way to increase student engagement and facilitate technology-assisted learning in university language courses. Questions I asked myself involved "Why are students reluctant to speak in the online lessons?", "How can I promote online peer review to university students?" and "Shall I promote the use of the Gongyeh App in my courses?"

I decided to use the Gongyeh App in my course and take advantage of its interactive peer review functions. Known as Gongyeh, which means "say something" in Cantonese, this online tool allows peer feedback on oral assessments. Using the app, learners can evaluate the performance of their presentations. This tool supports both live presentations in class as well as post-class video submissions via web browsers and mobile apps. Moreover, the Gongyeh App allows presenters to review the recordings of their presentations and monitor anonymous comments synchronized in real-time for evaluation and improvement. The application is available on the App Store for both iOS and Android devices. The service allows teachers to create classes and add students by entering students' email addresses, uploading a CSV file, or instructing students to scan the QR code after subscribing to https://www.gongyeh.com/ (Figure 1). Once the presentation tickets have been configured, they can be generated for each presenter or group. In what follows, the special features of the Gongyeh App will be highlighted.

1.3 The Innovation Aspect

This section elaborates on the use of the Gongyeh App and highlights the importance of interactivity and collaboration among peers in using this technological tool. In preparation for the online peer review process, the teacher instructed and assisted students in understanding the assessment rubrics. As part of the EAP course, students should comprehend the importance of Content, Delivery, Language, and Pronunciation as cornerstones of presentation success. A presentation rehearsal was then performed by students in front of the teacher and other students. As part of the evaluation process, students become the assessors for both themselves and their peers. The experience of undertaking these two roles was beneficial to students not only in helping them develop a better understanding of the expected assessment standard but also in helping them discover their weaknesses, which could be useful at a later stage when the students are supposed to present. As a last step, a critical evaluation of the Gongyeh App will be conducted and a post-evaluation will be performed (Figure 2).
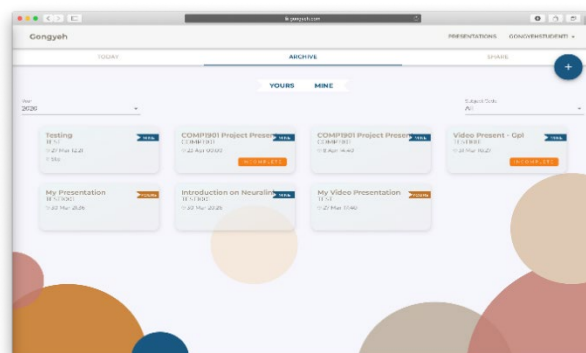

Figure 1: Interface of the Gongyeh App Online Assessment Platform (Knowledge Transfer and Entrepreneurship Office, 2021)

Figure 2: Process model of online presentation peer review (modified from Ho, 2022)

The above figure illustrates how students can benefit from the online peer review interface, Gongyeh, since it creates a standardized assessment parameter for all end users. Students may provide evaluative comments after they have a grasp of what constitutes good performance. Observing only good and bad exemplar videos will not suffice. A reasonable amount of time was given to students to explain their perception of the good and bad presentation videos. The teacher's expectations and the student's expectations would be narrowed in this sense. A teacher-student conversation can help student assessors clarify any concerns before the presentation assessment begins.

2. Methodology

2.1 Participants

The study involved full-time Year 1 students at an EMI university in Hong Kong between September 2022 and December 2022. A convenience sampling method (Cohen et al., 2018) was used to select the study subjects. About 28 students initially expressed interest in participating in this study after receiving email replies from ESL English for Academic Purposes (EAP) students who enrolled in the three-credit EAP course. As a result of the response time from their email replies, 12 students were chosen from the pool of participants. A variety of factors were considered when selecting students, such as gender, place of origin, year of study, and field of study. Participants originated from Hong Kong (n=6), Mainland China (n=4), and South Korea (n=2). There were seven females and five males from Year 1 entry, representing a variety of academic disciplines. Selection into the study did not require prior learning experience at other Hong Kong tertiary institutions or experience in equivalent EAP courses. It was guaranteed that participants would remain anonymous, and participants could withdraw from the study at any time.

2.2 Methods of Data Collection and Data Analysis

Twelve semi-structured interviews were conducted with ESL university students participating in the EAPs, ranging in length between 10 and 16 minutes. A relaxed and comfortable environment was created so that student participants could respond freely, and their perceptions of Gongyeh as a tool to assist them in peer evaluation and feedback were investigated. Data reliability was verified twice by member checks (Merriam, 1998). Each interview transcript was approved by the respective interviewees without modification. The data analysis was undertaken using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework, which included familiarizing myself with the data, developing initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, and defining and naming themes based on the relatively small sample size. For identifying the key language components that reflect the students' critical perceptions of an issue, the tape scripts were reviewed carefully to develop initial codes. Based on the frequency of

occurrence and similarities, I developed my interim themes after extracting my initial codes. Further comparisons of the original codes led to the refinement of the themes, which in turn were given the coding labels. By utilizing Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework, an account of the rich, detailed, and complex findings could be discovered. Through thematic analysis, researchers can integrate their key ideas and viewpoints while maintaining their flexibility at the same time. Toward the end of the data collection process, student participants were asked to confirm that the final research findings and discussion were accurate representations of their experiences throughout the research process as part of the second member check.

3. Results and Discussion

RQ1. What were students' attitudes and beliefs concerning the application of the Gongyeh App?

From the semi-structural interview, students were asked about how they perceived the use of the Gongyeh App in an EFL course. It can be inferred that this educational tool was considered useful and convenient as confirmed in four-fold based on the thematic analysis:

3.1 Usefulness and Convenience

> Gongyeh App is super convenient because the App can automatically generate video transcripts without asking us to do it manually. (Patrick)

> Gongyeh App can leave time-synchronous comments which is very time-saving. (Zoe)

> The use of the Gongyeh App makes my life easier as the app can classify comments with hashtags, which is super great. Without this function, I need to keep on checking what those comments are. (Mandy)

> The comment report can be generated through the app. I can review the presentation recording in a much more relaxing way. (Hugo)

From the above, it can be seen that EFL students are enthusiastic about using the Gongyeh App in presentation practice. Student presenters can maximize their learning efficiency and effectiveness with cutting-edge technology such as speech-and-text recognition programming and automated hashtag classification.

3.2 Grasping the Importance of Paralinguistic Knowledge

> In my high school, I seldom paid attention to oral presentations because usually high school students just bring along their note cards to come out and stand in front of other classmates and do presentations. That's it! (Ruth)

> In fact, my high school English teacher didn't pay any importance to oral presentation. As you may be aware, the HKDSE speaking paper only weighs 10%. Therefore, my teacher rarely asked my high school classmates and me to come out and do some speaking practice. But through the Gongyeh App, I can learn a lot of concrete feedback from my peers. (Jennifer)

> I realized how important body language is in the presentation after reviewing my presentation video and a classmate's recorded presentation through the Gongyeh App. Everything becomes much more visualized. (Jarvis)

The above quotes illustrate how the negligence of paralinguistic knowledge in oral presentation is a deep-rooted problem among students in Hong Kong because linguistic knowledge is overemphasized

rather than paralinguistic knowledge (Ho, 2022). It is more likely that the use of the Gongyeh App will compensate for the traditional input made by teachers as well as the printed handouts, with the assistance of multimodal features.

3.3 Less Outcome-oriented

> In the past, I was always thinking of getting good grades in my public exam, i.e., HKDSE. I just care about the final product, which is the assessment result, and pay less focus to the knowledge that has been learnt so far. But after using the Gongyeh App, I started to realize that body language, eye contact, pronunciation, intonation, and visualized materials are even more important than the final grade I earn. The feedback given by peers seems to be particularly useful in my future career. (Matthew)

A Confucian legacy has left Hong Kong with an examination-orientated culture (Berry, 2011). In the Hong Kong context, students are primarily interested in grades at university because in the past these were their final and most important outcomes. The local curriculum tends to place a great deal of emphasis on assessment results, which may in turn lead to tremendous pressure for students to strive for academic excellence. Students might lose focus on what they learn along the way if this continues over time. Yu et al. (2006) claim that feedback should be considered a critical function of all assessment methods. Ideally, feedback should result in student behaviour changes, which is how it is evaluated. In addition, a teacher and peer feedback system aims to complete the feedback loop by encouraging students to respond (Sadler, 1989). As a result, it is essential to explain to students how important feedback is in preparing for future assessments and career decisions.

3.4 Promotion of self-critique skills

> During the consultation, I presented to my teacher what I had found while peer reviewing my classmate's presentation video. Then, the teacher in turn gave me some major useful feedback as well so that I can prepare well in my next round of presentation assessment feedback. (Adam)

> In the old days, I gave my classmate some presentation feedback like Good! Excellent! It's OK! With the help of the Gongyeh App, now I know those comments I gave to my classmate beforehand were empty. If I continue giving those empty comments to my classmate, then my classmate will give me similar comments which will not be constructive and useful. (Jessica)

What can be gathered from the above is the importance of developing concrete, solid, and constructive comments. A key component of their feedback is to indicate how student presenters will interpret it and reflect on their learning development in response to the feedback.

In an effort to improve a student's presentation, it is a good idea to pick no more than three aspects that can be done within the student's time and other constraints. Students can be referred to external materials that they can reasonably access if possible. A longer list can result in students 'shutting down' and disregarding all of your suggestions.

RQ2. Does the Gongyeh App improve students' oral presentations compared to a teacher-centred approach?

The second research question involved exploring how students perceived the importance of the Gongyeh App in improving students' oral presentations compared to a teacher-centred approach. Overall, students see the importance of integrating the Gongyeh App into the EFL courses as confirmed in the following comments:

> Sometimes, teachers won't have any spare time to give us oral presentation feedback, particularly if all presentation timeslots are tightly packed in one lesson. With the use of the Gongyeh App, I can raise questions and read those comments raised by peers. (Rose)

> I feel my learning effectiveness has been enhanced with the use of the Gongyeh App. You know, in our culture, it is not so good to give some bad comments to others directly, especially during face-to-face interaction. But with the use of the Gongyeh App, it allows me to be anonymous to give peers a platform to comment on other people's work based on the assessment rubrics customized by our teacher. (Charles)

> By using the Gongyeh App, I can watch the presentation video and provide either synchronous or holistic feedback and grade every assessment criterion at any time and anywhere. (Jennifer)

As a result of the above, it is clear that the Gongyeh App not only assists peer assessors enrolling in university English courses with giving synchronous or holistic feedback and grades by the assessment criteria set by their subject teachers but also enables student presenters to receive constructive and useful feedback from their peers in real-time without time or venue constraints. A further advantage is that students would be able to analyze their weaknesses and even develop corresponding plans for improvement via the Gongyeh App (Ho, 2022).

4. Conclusion and Future Pedagogical Direction

The purpose of this study is to examine students' perceptions of the effects of the Gongyeh App on speaking assessments. As opposed to traditional pedagogy, which is a one-way street, the Gongyeh App not only helps teachers to reduce their workload while giving feedback, but it also alleviates student peers' embarrassment and anxiety associated with giving synchronous feedback. According to university students, the Gongyeh App facilitates the acquisition of professional presentation skills, which are considered extremely valuable in the pursuit of academic excellence and future employment. As this article demonstrated, one of the central tenets of Gongyeh App's success is that the app is inextricably linked to multimodality. The Gongyeh App provides presenters with the opportunity to review feedback according to a set schedule and to replay the presentation video at any time. In fact, a groundbreaking transformation is taking place in our world as a result of big data and smart digital technologies, as stated by Har (forthcoming). Despite this, little attention has been paid to understanding how mobile applications like the Gongyeh App affect language learning or how they can be used as auxiliary tools in conventional EFL speaking lessons that are considered to be more flexible, inclusive, and efficient than currently available tools in language learning. Presumably, the Gongyeh App will enable student learners to prepare themselves for the rapidly evolving workplace context caused by digital technologies.

As evidenced by the incredibly low mark distribution on the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education Examination (English Paper 4 Speaking: 10%) (Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority [HKEAA], 2023), it is unsurprising that oral English skills may also be neglected in a local university educational system that is primarily assessment-oriented. While this remains true in most ESL classrooms, oral presentation skills must be emphasized more. By using peer-reflective methods, students will be able to reinforce their presentation skills with each other, which is a skill that is usually overlooked and not addressed by local high school English teachers and students.

Considering the relatively small sample size, it is not possible to represent the entire population of Hong Kong EAP students and ESL teachers studying and teaching English in universities in Hong Kong. The findings of this study, however, may contribute to a debate about whether the Gongyeh App can promote peer review in students' presentations and boost students' engagement by illustrating what students value. Currently, students' perceptions are revealed in the data, but adding the perspectives of other participants, such as teachers, could provide a more comprehensive picture. The retrospective dimension of this article allows us to understand how students perceived the Gongyeh App, while the prospective dimension provides insightful information on the possibility of peer review functionality in

EAP speaking assessments at the university level. It is interesting to note that the Gongyeh App has opened an array of new opportunities in the teaching of English as a result of the strategies that have been employed to utilize this app.

Funding

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