A Review of the AI Feedback Generating Website "EAP Talk"

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Title	EAP Talk
Author	EAP Talk
Contact Information	www.eaptalk.com
Type of Product	AI generated feedback website and app
Platform	Online website, iOS, and Android
Minimum Hardware Requirements	Website: Computer, browser, and internet connection Mobile Application: not specified
Price	Currently free

Introduction

The role that Artificial Intelligence (AI) will play in the future of language education remains unknown. Yet, there are ongoing efforts to explore this new frontier. With the advancements of natural language processing (NLP), collocation extraction, and point mutual information, computers are more easily able to comprehend recorded human speech. These technologies, combined with other ubiquitous technologies, such as smart phones, tablets, and the internet, can now afford language learners with instant feedback in a variety of ways. Pikhart (2020) has called for educators to keep pace with these technological advances, to ensure that educational institutions and processes remain competitive and viable means of language learning. This includes pragmatic utilization of AI for online courses, eLearning, and educational mobile apps. This article reviews one of these efforts, EAP Talk, which is self-described as "an AI-powered system that allows EFL learners in the context of higher education to practice speaking and delivering academic presentations" ("EAP Talk User guide for students", n.d.).

Features of the Technology

EAP Talk (https://www.eaptalk.com/#/) can be accessed via a computer web browser, WeChat, or alternatively, downloaded from the aforementioned webpage as an Android or Apple app. At the time of publication, the app is not available on the Google or Apple store. It is also worth noting that at the time of publication EAP Talk can be used free of charge. After registering, users can practice reading sample academic texts

(called 'reading aloud'), answer questions that relate to potential presentation topics ('presentation'), and practice individual academic words ('word').

In Reading Aloud, users can choose from 171 short academic texts of varying levels of difficulty, ranging from one short paragraph to several paragraphs. These paragraphs can also be filtered by the following areas of study: architecture, business, humanities and social science, information technology / electronic and electrical engineering, and science. After recording themselves reading the texts, users will then receive automatic AI generated feedback, which will be discussed in further detail below. Many of the texts have an example recording of someone reading the text that students can listen to, thereby providing an opportunity for users to compare their pronunciation with the examples provided. Figure 1 provides an example of a Reading Aloud task.

Figure 1

An example reading aloud practice exercise
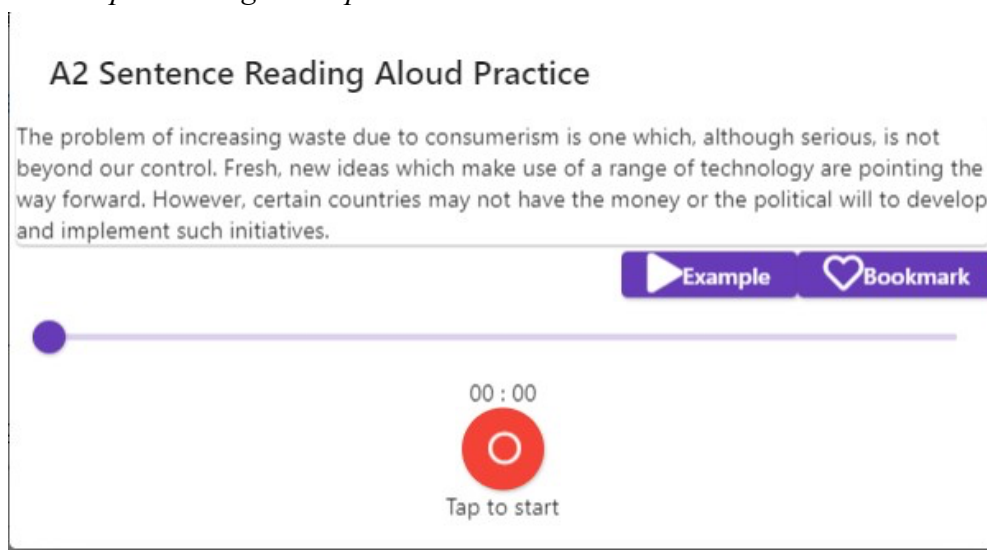
In Presentation, users can choose from 96 presentation topics. These are usually presented in the form of a question or speaking prompt, such as "how do you try to protect the environment?" or "please give a presentation about the project you have completed this semester." Others, such as "my favorite subject" seem to just indicate a topic that users can practice speaking about. An example presentation prompt is provided in Figure 2.

Figure 2

An example presentation practice exercise
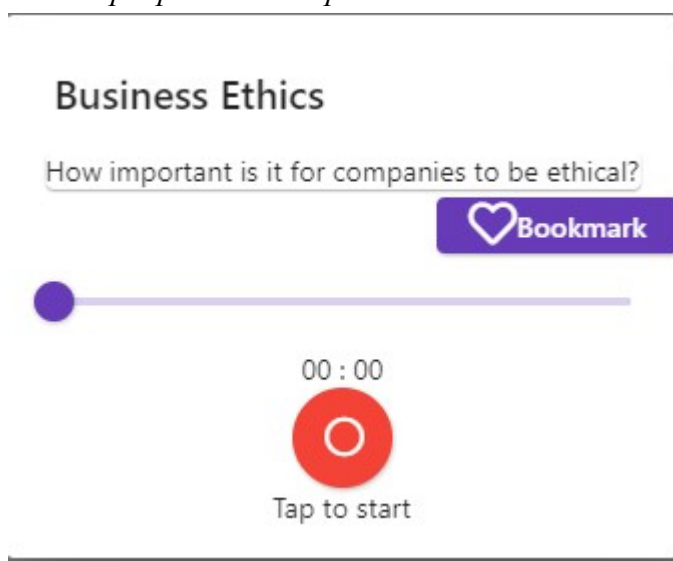
In Word, users can pick from general academic words, organized into five levels, and practice their pronunciation of the word. The word and its phonetic transcription, part of speech, translation in Chinese, and an example are given for each word.

For each of the three forms of practice, users are provided with feedback as soon as their audio recording has been uploaded and processed. For Reading Aloud and Word, words are color coded, each according to the quality of the user's pronunciation, as determined by the AI program (see Figure 3). An overall score and feedback on word stress is also provided. For Presentation and Reading Aloud, users receive a total score, as well as a score for fluency, grammar, content, and pronunciation (see Figure 4 for example feedback given on a Presentation recording).

Figure 3
Example feedback on a word practice exercise

Figure 4
An example of feedback provided on a presentation exercise

Utilizing EAP Talk for Language Teaching and Learning

While there are a number of ways this technology could be leveraged for language learning and teaching, it is the author's opinion that this technology is best suited for individual practice outside of English for academic purposes (EAP), content and integrated language learning (CLIL), or college preparation classes. While it is certainly possible that teachers simply assign students to practice for a set period of time each day, language learners are more likely to make progress if they are reflecting on their learning experience and are accountable for their learning in some way to the teacher. An EAP Talk practice log, where students record some or all of the following information, would likely help facilitate learning: What was practiced? How long was it practiced? What were the fluency, grammar, content, and pronunciation scores? What words were difficult for you to pronounce? What phrases or word combinations were difficult for you to say fluently? Based on the feedback provided to you, how do you think you can improve your fluency/grammar/content/pronunciation?

In addition, the Presentation portion of EAP Talk is likely to be more efficacious if it connects to class topics and assignments. For example, if business students are required to give a presentation in class for an actual grade, wherein they analyze BMW and its marketing strategies, then students are more likely to be motivated to put in the time and effort required to research the information necessary in order to respond to the EAP Talk Presentation prompt "Analyze BMW and its marketing strategies in China with SWOT analysis". Without the incentive of an earned grade, it is doubtful that users of EAP Talk would be motivated enough to conduct research and analysis.

Challenges in Using the Technology

As it currently stands, there are some issues with the functionality of the program that may make it difficult for teachers and students to use it in an effective way. For Read Aloud and Presentation, according to the user guide ("EAP Talk User guide for students", n.d.), the program should automatically display the words that a user records and color code them according to how correct the pronunciation of the words are. However, as can been seen in Figure 4, the words spoken during the recording are not transcribed and displayed back to the user on the feedback page.

In addition, there are some issues in the selection of topics and prompts. For example, the prompt "Please give a presentation analyzing the marketing strategies using SWOT analysis" is difficult to respond to because the user doesn't know what marketing strategies they should address in their response. Some prompts seem to be designed based on class assignments from a specific class. Students not in these classes are likely to get confused by these kinds of prompts. An example of this is the prompt "Please give a presentation on how the portfolio tasks improve your EAP skills." Many users will not know what portfolio tasks the prompt is referring to and therefore be unable to respond in a meaningful way.

EAP Talk has a clear focus on language learners from a China, which at times may be problematic for users outside of China. An EFL learner studying in Mexico, for example, may not be interested in BMW's marketing strategies in China, which is a

prompt in the Presentation portion of the program. As another example of the China-centric nature of the program, the definitions of words in the Word section are provided in Chinese. This is likely a minor inconvenience for most young users as they are usually savvy enough with technology that they can open another web browser tab and use an online dictionary of their choice. Despite the focus on EAP learners from China, the developers of the program should be commended for the English used on the platform; a non-Chinese speaking user with some English abilities can navigate the program with ease, and the user guide for students is in clear and understandable English.

Lastly, there are some issues with the manner in which the feedback is provided. The lack of explanation of what the feedback scores mean makes it difficult for users to ascertain the meaning of some of the scores. Using the scores provided in Figure 4 as an example, the user is never told what the total score is out of. It is therefore difficult to understand what a 2.63 score means. Is it out of 5? Is it out of 10? Second, it is unclear what accent users' pronunciation is being compared against. The program consistently gave the author, a native English speaker with an American accent, high scores in fluency, but low scores in pronunciation. When slowing down the rate of speech to annunciate each word more carefully, the program would award higher scores for pronunciation. However, this would lower the fluency score. It was impossible for the author to score high on both fluency and pronunciation, despite being a native speaker. This led the author to wonder if the AI has been trained to recognize and accept a variety of standard accents or if the AI is biased towards a particular accent (e.g., received pronunciation). More information as to how the AI has been trained and how it assesses pronunciation scores would be beneficial to users.

Conclusion

EAP Talk is one of the novel programs that leverage AI for the purposes of language learning and teaching. However, what makes EAP Talk unique is its focus on EAP, a niche in the language education market, yet important part of many EFL learners' language learning experience at college and/or university. While there are some issues in the functionality and content of the program, it is exciting to see the progress made in leveraging AI for EAP. Being able to receive instantaneous AI provided feedback on EAP related topics is huge step forward for the field of EAP. The usefulness of AI programs like EAP Talk will likely only increase as their algorithms are refined. Yet, despite the potential of EAP Talk and other AI programs that generate feedback on language use, it remains to be seen if these technologies will bridge the chasm (Moore, 2014) between early adopters and an early majority of language learners and educators.

Conflict of Interest

The authors of this publication declare there is no conflict of interest.

References

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