Student weaknesses in aesthetics of posters

Su-Hie Ting[1]

1 Universiti Malaysia Sarawak

Abstract

The study aimed to investigate areas of student weaknesses in aesthetics of posters for oral presentations. The objectives of the study were to: (1) identify the text features used in terms of text style, positioning on the poster, and amount of text; (2) describe use of colours for highlighting information and contrast with background; and (3) evaluate use of images in terms of relevance to content and position on the poster. The data were 15 posters created by 75 students working in groups of five for a university course and comments by their lecturer on the aesthetics of the posters. Analysis of the posters showed that the students had the most problems with text features and the least problems with size, relevance and positioning of images. Half of the posters showed good choice of colours for text and background, but the other half of the posters had visibility issues due to poor choice of colours and lack of contrast. The undesirable text features were excessive capitalisation and text-heavy posters resulting from the use of full sentences. The study identified particular points of weaknesses that students should be alerted to so that their oral presentation slides and posters are more aesthetically appealing to enhance the message.

Su-Hie Ting

Faculty of Education, Language and Communication

Universiti Malaysia Sarawak

94300 Kota Samarahan

Sarawak

Malaysia

(shting@unimas.my, suhieting@gmail.com)

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Introduction

University students are usually required to make oral presentations as part of their assessments. They customarily make PowerPoint slides as an aid in their oral presentations. Well-prepared slides enhance the quality of delivery by providing notes of the content and inject visual interest into the presentation. Because of the importance of slides in effective presentations, students are taught how to produce aesthetically appealing slides and delivery skills in generic courses in the university such as in language courses and professional communication courses. There is also an abundance of tips for effective PowerPoint presentations (e.g., Alley & Neeley, 2005; Holzl, 1997; Katt et al., 2008) but general observations by lecturers indicate that students' PowerPoint slides are found wanting. Therefore, for the teaching of oral presentation skills to effectively meet the needs of students, the quality of their PowerPoint slides needs to be studied.

There have been many studies on the quality of PowerPoint slides produced by lecturers. Bartsch et al. (2003) found that students liked their lecturers to use PowerPoint slides than transparencies, and this study was conducted during the days when overhead transparencies were still in use. The study showed that students performed the most poorly on recall when they were taught using slides with text and irrelevant pictures, compared to text-only slides and slides with text and a relevant picture. Kosslyn et al.'s (2012) study showed that academic research slideshows were similar to business slideshows, and tended to violate cognitive communication principles, and consequently taxing human information processing. Kosslyn et al. (2012) explained that when the audience's encode information well when there is discriminability (or contrast) between the to-be-encoded material and the background and other patterns. After visual patterns are encoded, the materials are integrated in the working memory but the working memory has a limited capacity, which is why irrelevant information and unnecessary changes in appearance of slides can lead the audience astray (Kosslyn et al., 2012). Finally, the audience has to extract meaning from the information on the slides. To help the audience access their long-term memory, slides need to contain explicit explanations on new concepts, compatible graphics, and relevant amount and type of information. The research on PowerPoint slides has been on student preferences (Apperson et al., 2008) and the effect on students' learning (Chou et al., 2015; Cosgun Ögeyik, 2017; Nouri & Shahid, 2005; Savoy et al., 2009).

Much is known about students' preferences for PowerPoint presentation structure and the effect on their learning in different subjects. However, there is a lack of research findings on the quality of PowerPoint slides and posters produced by students. Little is known about whether students are able to produce aesthetically appealing presentation materials. PowerPoint slides present the information over a number of slides but posters show all the information at one go. With so much information to fit into one poster, compliance with the cognitive communication principles becomes even more crucial.

The study aimed to investigate areas of student weaknesses in aesthetics of posters for oral presentations. The objectives of the study were to: (1) identify the text features used in terms of text style, positioning on the poster, and amount of text; (2) describe use of colours for highlighting information and contrast with background; and (3) evaluate use of images in terms of relevance to content and position on the poster.

Method of study