

Making the Most of PowerPoint Slides for Rapid eLearning

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Abstract

Teachers of English have been using PowerPoint presentations to assist teacher-led instruction for more than ten years. PowerPoint presentations have become popular because of Microsoft's penetration into the market and the user-friendly authoring environment PowerPoint offers (Fisher, 2003). These days, most teachers of English have built up a wealth of materials in this easy and familiar format. When faced with the challenges of the eLearning era to build more interactive, media-rich materials, teachers are tempted to look for and learn different tools like HTML, XML, Flash™ ActionScript. Unfortunately for the non-technically minded, these tools are not easy to master and they soon find themselves giving up. This paper explores and discusses a very practical alternative of making the most of PowerPoint

slides by turning them into interactive multimedia eLearning materials, which could be published on the Web, delivered on a CD-ROM, or sent by e-mail, with a tool called Articulate™ Presenter. The output is a single Flash-based presentation, which can be viewed and explored on virtually any computer with a Web browser.

The paper also reports on a preliminary study where a set of PowerPoint slides created to teach Secondary 4 grammar was converted to a Flash-based presentation for self-learning. An interactive quiz is embedded into the presentation with a view to enriching the learning experience. Twenty students were directed to work with the eLearning object created on “the infinitive”. Feedback from these learners suggest that eLearning objects of this kind are welcomed additions to the formal curriculum and this paper proposes that more eLearning objects be created from ELT teachers’ own collection of PowerPoint files.

Objectives

This paper aims to introduce to the ELT community the potential of a Rapid eLearning development tool called Articulate Presenter. It argues that with the PowerPoint collections ELT teachers already have, it can offer a practical solution for ELT teachers who are eager to develop quickly and cost-effectively media-rich interactive eLearning deliverables suitable for web, CD-ROM or e-mail delivery, but may not have the budget and/or human resources to embark on any large scale project. The paper will also report on a preliminary study where a set of PowerPoint slides created to teach Secondary 4 grammar was converted to a Flash-based self-access eLearning programme with Articulate Presenter. The paper will present the feedback solicited from a review questionnaire, make suggestions as to how best the tool can be used, and outline plans for future development.

PowerPoint as a Huge ELT Resources Repository

The first time when I saw a PowerPoint presentation, it was 1992. It was about the time when Microsoft first launched this revolutionizing presentation tool. Most people in the audience were amazed at the visual impact which the slide show created: the neat, stylish typographic and colour combinations of the slides, the slide transition effects, and the bullet

animations in the presentation. Since then, PowerPoint has become equivalent to a slide show presentation.

The teaching community had not been slow to tap into the power of PowerPoint.

PowerPoint presentations have become popular among teachers of English because of Microsoft's penetration into the market and the user-friendly authoring environment PowerPoint offers (Fisher, 2003; Liu, 2004). Many teachers have given up on the handwritten overhead transparencies and the complicated process of creating a nice looking page in Word and then producing an overhead transparency using a transparency maker, let alone the use of chalk and board for the purpose of presenting prepared texts and graphics. This is particularly true in higher education, where somehow the use of the whiteboard is now associated with low-tech or even lack of preparation.

No doubt, after more than 10 years of using PowerPoint, teachers, ELT teachers included, have accumulated a HUGE collection of teaching materials created with PowerPoint and delivered as PowerPoint. Despite various condemnations and warnings from people like Creed (1997), Hlynka & Mason (1998) Mason & Hlynka (1998), Keller (2003), Tutfe (2003), and Thompson (2003), about PowerPoint's teacher-centredness and content

oversimplification, the millions of copies of PowerPoint sold worldwide continue to generate millions of educational slides every year.

Since the World Wide Web became popular and penetrated every ELT classroom in the late 1990s, ELT teachers have turned to add value to their teaching by creating web sites or web pages for different purposes. When faced with the challenges of the eLearning era to build more interactive, media-rich pedagogically sound materials, ELT teachers are tempted to search for and learn to use different tools like HTML, XML, Flash™ ActionScript. Unfortunately, most ELT teachers, who are usually non-technically minded, find these tools difficult to master and soon give up.

Call for Rapid eLearning Development

Since around 2002, there appeared in the market a kind of Flash-savvy programmes for PowerPoint. They are designed to enhance the functions of PowerPoint and ultimately export PowerPoint to a Flash (.swf) format suitable for Web delivery. Articulate Presenter and the better-known Macromedia Breeze are examples of these tools. Breeze is a relatively sophisticated and expensive product, which this paper will not discuss. Apart from being a PowerPoint to Flash converter, Breeze is also a Web conferencing and live presentation tool. Other PowerPoint to Flash products include Lersus, SNAP! Studio, Content Point, Webex,

and Mindflash (Archibald, 2005). FlashPoint, PPT2Flash, Presentation Pro, AuthorPoint, and Powerbullet are some others (Rossi, 2004).

What Macromedia Breeze has alerted the eLearning community to is the concept of **Rapid eLearning** and the great demand both in the educational and the business training sectors for Rapid eLearning tools. By definition, Rapid eLearning is a kind of online learning programme which can be developed in a matter of weeks, rather than months and is typically authored by subject matter experts (Bersin & Associates, 2004). When we as ELT teachers develop our own eLearning material, we are doing just that. We are the subject experts and we want to create material or programmes within a very short time, say a few weeks, and we often want to do it without having to involve a team of technical experts: IT specialists, instructional designers, and instructional technologists.

Some may doubt the wisdom of using PowerPoint as the fundamental tool for developing eLearning material. However, it is undeniable that PowerPoint is used almost everywhere and by everyone. Clothier (2003) reports to the surprise of many that PowerPoint ranks number two, after Macromedia Dreamweaver, in the list of most frequently used tool used by eLearning developers and instructional designers for creating computer-based training applications. He points out that PowerPoint allows for creation of compelling

eLearning content. Just as most Word users typically use about 1% of the available features and functions of Word, most PowerPoint users only use the best basic capabilities of PowerPoint. It can be observed that PowerPoint offers a great of variety of text and object animations, even providing for path-based animations to be created with relative ease, and a pleasing flexibility for interactivity and differential navigation patterns. PowerPoint also allows for insertion of graphical images, digital videos, and Flash animations, contributing to its media richness. If these features of PowerPoint are taken advantage of, we can expect compelling and engaging eLearning content created. As Clothier (2003) puts it, “Richness of content limitation is a reflection of its use – not of the tool itself.”

Articulate Presenter as a Rapid eLearning Development Tool

Articulate Presenter sells as a stand-alone product or bundles with Articulate Quizmaker in a package called **Articulate Rapid eLearning Studio**. At the time of writing, version 5.004 and version 2.03 are the latest versions of Presenter and Quizmaker respectively.

Once installed on the computer, Articulate Presenter attaches itself to Microsoft

PowerPoint and allows users to invoke its various functions by way of an added drop-down

menu from PowerPoint's menu bar, as shown in Fig.1.

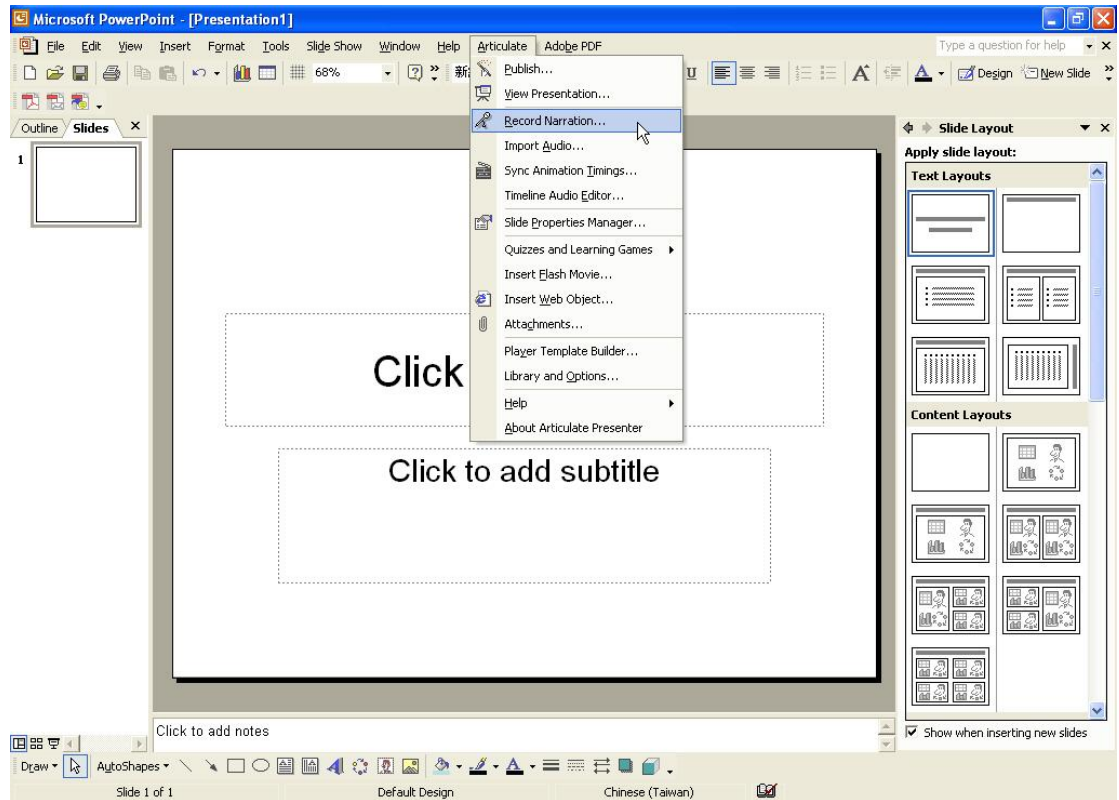


Fig. 1 The Articulate Drop-down Menu from within the PowerPoint

Workspace

The Articulate website (www.articulate.com) offers a couple of excellent demos (

<http://www.articulate.com/demos.html>) on the functions and user-friendliness of Articulate

Presenter, one called **Overview Presentation** and the other called **Quick Start Tutorial**. In

brief, what Articulate Presenter does is to convert PowerPoint slides into an e-deliverable

object which can embed audio, retain the PowerPoint animations, and carry interactive

quizzes and/or games. The output is a Flash-format object, with the file extension *.swf*, which is generally believed to be viewable on over 98% of the computers in the world. The Flash format is well-known and well-liked for its small file size, its high level of compatibility with different operating systems and different web browsers. Once posted on the web, learners can access the material any time they like and spend time working on it at their own pace and choose their own learning path.

The main provision of Articulate Presenter which will be useful to most ELT teachers is the **Record narration** function and the **Sync Animation Timings** functions.

While PowerPoint itself provides a Record narration function, anyone having tried to use it will understand how dreadful it can be. You need to record in one go for all your slides. If anything goes wrong, you simply have to start all over again. This deters even the most talented narration expert. When working with Articulate Presenter, this is the typical procedure:

In PowerPoint

1. create learning content
2. organise animations and interactivity
3. write up notes for every PowerPoint slide.

In Quizmaker

4. create interactive quizzes or games for insertion at appropriate points in the slides

In the Articulate drop-down menu

5. record narrations for one slide at a time following the notes in PowerPoint
6. synchronize narrations with animations on each PowerPoint slide
7. publish into a Rapid eLearning object for delivery on the Web, in a Learning Management System (LMS), or on a CD

When published, the interface of the output object consists of 5 main areas, as in

Fig. 2:

1. Branding Panel
2. Presenter Panel
3. Navigation Panel
4. Toolbar
5. Content Panel
6. Playback Controls

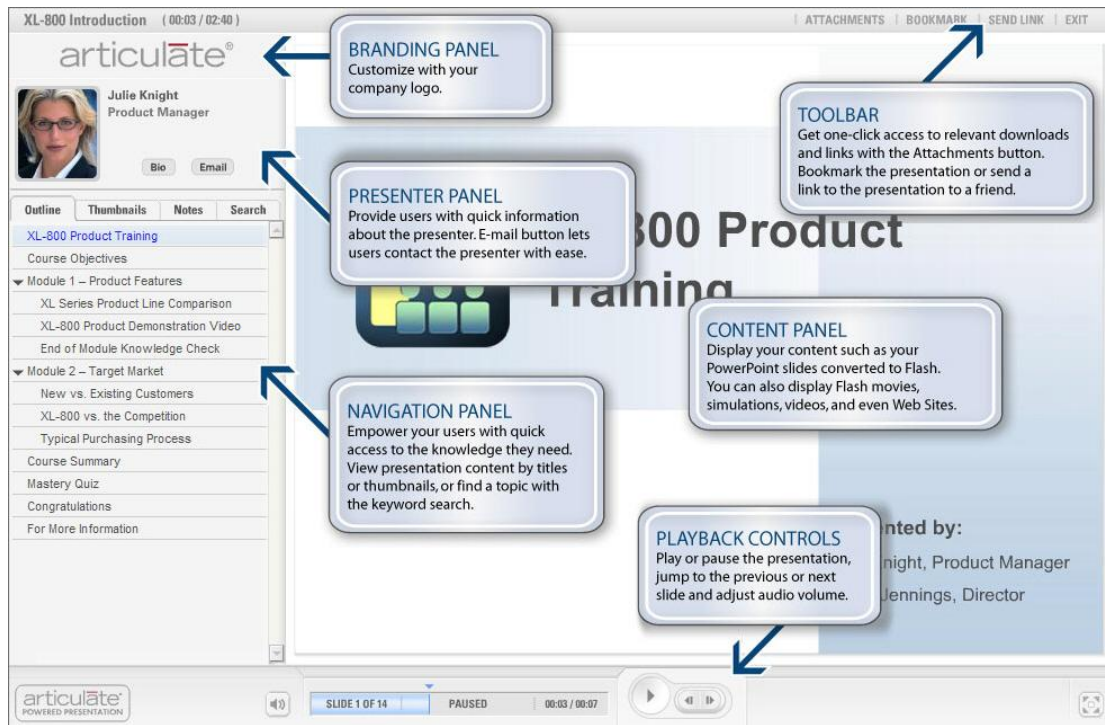


Fig. 2 The Articulate Presenter Interface

(Picture taken from www.articulate.com)

The Branding Panel allows you to establish your institutional identity by inserting your organisation's logo. The Presenter Panel is a place for biodata and contact information. The Navigation Panel is where the learner can navigate to different parts of the object at a single click of the mouse, either via descriptive topics, or graphical thumbnails. In the panel, a search facility is also provided.

PowerPoint slides will appear in the main Content Panel. The power of Articulate Presenter lies in allowing users to very easily add audio narration to slide contents. As texts and graphics are revealed on the slide in the same way they appear in the PowerPoint slides,

Articulate Presenter will keep these animated sequences and allow audio narrations to synchronize with the animations.

A Case for Using Articulate Presenter

As pointed out earlier in this paper, ELT teachers have been keen on learning to produce interactive, media-rich pedagogically sound materials for rapid eLearning.

Experience in using the trial version of Articulate Presenter indicates that it fits very well into the criteria for developing Rapid eLearning. Bersin & Associates (2004) lists the following criteria for Rapid eLearning:

1. Courseware developed in less than 3 weeks
2. Subject matter experts as the primary resource for development
3. A well-known tool (e.g. PowerPoint) as the starting point
4. Simple assessment, feedback and tracking
5. Media elements enhancing learning but not creating technology barriers
6. Learning modules to be taken in 1 hour or less
7. Either as a synchronous or asynchronous model

When an ELT teacher uses Articulate Presenter with teaching or learning materials already created in PowerPoint, most of these criteria are already met. Criterion 4 is met with features in and Articulate Quizmaker, where simple assessment-oriented quizzes or games can be created, feedback for learners can be prepared, and a simple tracking of performance can be done. When output from Articulate Presenter is hosted with a SCORM- or AICC-compliant Learning Management System, like the very popular WebCT and Blackboard, more sophisticated controls over performance tracking are possible. As regards criterion 7, Articulate Presenter complies with an asynchronous model of learning. (Macromedia Breeze does provide for a synchronous model, delivering live, scheduled learning events.)

With the huge collection of PowerPoint slides ELT teachers have developed, it is the position of this paper that they should be better harnessed to release the tremendous knowledge they embed and thus create the tremendous impact they can potentially make on English language learners. When PowerPoint slides are used traditionally and typically in a teacher-fronted and teacher-led situation, they remain dormant and give no output in teaching and learning unless they are shown in the classroom. Once converted into a Flash-based presentation or programme, they can be made available online, sent via e-mail or burnt on to CD-ROM disks to meet the learning needs of a great number of learners. Whether it is for the

purpose of introducing new language, for revision, or simply for promoting interest in language learning, a tool like Articulate Rapid eLearning Studio provides a means of delivering eLearning objects quickly and in a presentable and functional interface. What ELT teachers need, as most of them are not technically-minded or Flash-literate, is a tool just like that, where recordings of narration, synchronisation with animations, and inclusion of interactive quizzes or games can easily be accomplished.

Some may argue that PowerPoint slides can be made available using other delivery media or methods. On the Web, they can be downloaded simply as PowerPoint Presentation files (*.ppt* or *.pps*), Adobe Acrobat Portable Document Format files (*.pdf*), or Macromedia FlashPaper files (*.swf*). Doubtless, PowerPoint-based documents in these various formats are already very common on the Web. A Google search will verify this. However, whatever the search string, the search engine will bring up a massive number of files in these various formats, which are without audio elements, without interaction, and without the least qualities of, or intention to be delivered as, an eLearning object.

For those ELT practitioners who have already created web pages to support teaching and learning, apparently the majority these days, there is even a stronger case for creating rapid eLearning objects. It is a one-off effort which one has to make but the outcome

will go a long way for learners, year after year. From the point of view of **sustainability**, eLearning programmes are imperishable. Once created, they are there to stay and will benefit a great population of web surfing learners for not only years but generations to come.

In conclusion, the author very strongly believes that it is high time ELT teachers stopped using PowerPoint only as a lecture or presentation aid. With a good rapid eLearning development tool and some efforts, a PowerPoint file can be transformed into a dynamic audio-assisted interactive eLearning object, not in several months' time, but rather in a few weeks.

A Preliminary Study

In order to find out more about the application of Articulate Rapid eLearning Studio, a small scale preliminary study was carried out using a set of PowerPoint slides used with permission from a practicing secondary school teacher teaching English to Secondary 4 students in Hong Kong. The original presentation was used for introducing the infinitive. It was converted into an eLearning object using Articulate Presenter Trial version and Quizmaker Trial Version. About a total of nineteen hours' time was spent on re-creating the narration script, enhancing the original graphical elements and animations, recording the narration and synchronising the narration with animations. A review questionnaire, as shown in

Appendix 1, was used to solicit feedback from learners. A free online text-to-speech facility called RealSpeak (<http://www.nuance.com/realspeak/demo/>) was used to create the narration.

Learners were instructed by their English teacher to access the eLearning object created on the Infinitives from home and work on it in any way they like. The URL they accessed the material is: <http://www.ilc.cuhk.edu.hk/bma/infinitive/>.

Learners were asked to give feedback on four statements, referring to the eLearning object as *the Object*. The mean ratings on a 5-point scale showing how much they agreed with the statements are shown in Table 1.

Statement	Mean Rating
1. I have learnt effectively using <i>the Object</i> .	3.3
2. I can follow and understand the audio (narration) part of <i>the Object</i> easily.	3.1
3. I find it enjoyable to view and work with <i>the Object</i> .	3.2
4. <i>The Object</i> has stimulated my interest in learning English.	3.1

Table 1 Learners' Mean Ratings Showing Agreement with Statements

In addition, there are four more open-ended questions. In general, feedback from these questions seems to suggest that most learners like the audio-supported nature of the material and the inclusion of an interactive quiz in the material. The learners responded almost unanimously to say they would like to see more eLearning objects of this kind created to help with their independently learning efforts. Some expressed difficulty they had when they listened to the narration, which was viewed as very fast speech.

The following unedited comments also give encouraging comments on the eLearning object used.

I think this set is quite good. It can let me more interest in learning English.

It's very meaningful.

It is interesting than PowerPoint slides.

The design is attractive.

The object looks more professional than a set of PowerPoint slides.

It looks very attractive.

I like the example and the voice!

Can help me learn more about English.

Yes, it's useful.

The object is easy to understand.

It attracts us to learn English from internet.

Can replay the object.

It have some pictures and sounds to express.

While the ratings from the learners do not show anything striking, as they tend to crowd in the mid-range, the unedited comments from the open-ended questions suggest the following about the Infinitive programme:

1. The majority of learners welcome the available narration.
2. The eLearning object is more interesting than PowerPoint slides.
3. The narration is too fast and presents difficulty to most learners.
4. Most learners enjoy working with the interactive quiz.

Conclusion

The major advantages of developing Rapid eLearning material with Articulate Presenter are of time and cost. According to Archibald (2005), the cost for traditional e-learning solutions can range between US\$10,000 and \$50,000 per hour of eLearning. When ELT teachers use Articulate Presenter with their own PowerPoint materials, the only major

cost is the cost of the Articulate package. When development can be completed in a short timeframe, there are a great number of merits.

On top of time and cost, this paper proposes that **control** is another significant merit. When all the resources are under the control of the ELT teacher who is the subject matter expert, as well as the eLearning developer, there is no need to rely on external expertise like instructional designers or technologists. The teacher enjoys much greater flexibility and has much greater room for creation and innovation. Efforts made to continually develop the material will more easily be sustained.

ELT teachers who are keen on developing their own eLearning programmes are strongly recommended that they try out Articulate Presenter. A free 15-day trial version can be downloaded from the Articulate website (www.articulate.com). If something can be completed in these 15 days, the output will be fully functional and usable by learners. The only difference this trial eLearning programme will have from one created with a licensed version is that it carries a little watermark advert for Articulate. With the PowerPoint collection ELT teachers have accumulated over the years, keen teachers will find it a challenging but manageable experience developing rapid eLearning programmes for the benefit of their own students, and other learners landing on their website.

From feedback in this preliminary study, it appears that teachers will find it more useful to record their own narration, instead of using a text-to-speech engine like the one used in this study. That way, the speed of the narration is more likely to match the listening abilities of the learners, and learners may also have the opportunity of hearing their own teacher, i.e. a voice they are familiar with. This study reveals that it is in fact a lot of trouble working with the free online text-to-speech engine, since it has a limit of 200 characters each time. It can take quite a lot of time to create a narration of a very small learning package, let alone the fact the engines gives no control over the speed of the speech synthesised.

At the Independent Learning Centre (ILC), the Chinese University of Hong Kong, where the author works, plans are in place to develop a number of eLearning packages in-house and to make them available online from the ILC website as one of ILC's initiatives to promote independent English language learning. Currently a series on **Learning English is Fun** is being developed, and a pilot version on the topic of *anagrams* is available at the time of writing from <http://www.ilc.cuhk.edu.hk/english/elearning/anagrams/>. The author welcomes comments and suggestions from other English language teachers and ELT practitioners to help perfect our development work for the benefit of thousands of potential learners visiting the ILC website each year.

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The Chinese University of Hong Kong
The Independent Learning Centre
eLearning Object Review Questionnaire



This review questionnaire aims to seek your feedback on the eLearning object “**The Infinitive**” (Let’s call it *the Object*). Please answer the questions by circling a number on a 5-point scale or giving a tick, and in the space provided. **Please return this form to us via your English teacher.**

Strongly disagree

Strongly agree

1. I have learnt effectively using *the Object*.
1. 1 2 3 4 5
2. I can follow and understand the audio (narration) part of *the Object* easily.
1. 1 2 3 4 5
3. I find it enjoyable to view and work with *the Object*.
1. 1 2 3 4 5
4. *The Object* has stimulated my interest in learning English.
1 2 3 4 5

Please answer these questions:

1. Compared with a set of PowerPoint slide, what advantages or disadvantages can you see of *the Object*?

2. What are the features that you like about *the Object*?

3. What are the features that you dislike about *the Object*?

4. Would you like to see more eLearning objects of this kind created to help you learn on your own?

Any other comments and suggestions for improvement:

Your level: Form 4/5 **Have you been taught this topic before in class?** Yes./No.

— Thank you —