

SOFTWARE REVIEW OF U.S.A. LEARNS

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Abstract

This paper is a review of the *U.S.A. Learns* software that provides beginner, lower intermediate and intermediate students with activities to improve their English language skills. It includes reading, writing, listening, speaking, vocabulary, and grammar. The software application *U.S.A. Learns* is meant for students who are seeking to acquire basic skills to use the English language. It provides practices for the skills needed to approach English for communicative and academic purposes.

This review provides a general description of the software and then evaluates it in terms of the pedagogical framework provided by Cummins, Brown, and Sayers (2007) to examine software technology tools.

2. Product data

Publisher: U.S.A. Learns website, <http://www.usalearns.org>

Product type: online software for developing academic study skills

Language(s): North American English

Level: Beginner, low intermediate and intermediate

Media format: online, <http://www.usalearns.org>

Platform: Windows standalone, Windows/XP/Vista/7, network, online, Mac online, browser

Hardware requirements: computer, microphones and speakers or headphones

Supplementary software: *Adobe Flash Player*

Price: free language-learning apps

3. Description

Many scholars like Lovell and Phillips (2009) believe that technology can enhance the learner's

literacy and academic growth because it can “enable students to enjoy immediate individual feedback, work independently, and gain a sense of accomplishment” (p. 201). Although there are multiple varieties of online learning materials for English as a second language (ESL), it is challenging for ESL teachers to easily find good language learning applications that meet all the requirements of their students.

Furthermore, using technology effectively and efficiently for teaching purposes is not an easy task. Learners first need to foster language skills such as active listening, speaking, reading, and writing to communicate in the target language effectively. *U.S.A. Learns* is online software which attempts to meet these aims. It targets three different levels of English language proficiency, which are beginner, lower intermediate, and intermediate levels (see Figure 1). It can be used in classrooms and students can practice using it autonomously as well.



Figure 1. The three language levels.

To gain an overall understanding of the *U.S.A. Learns* software, a learner clicks on the introduction section, which provides him or her with instructions on how to register, choose the right level and use the software properly. Once the user creates an account, he or she can access

the site and navigate it with ease (see Figure 2).



Figure 2. The *U.S.A. Learns* home page.

When the learner accesses the application, he or she chooses the level that is best suited to him or her from the course menu section. Each unit has a lesson menu and each lesson starts with an introduction that explains the goals of the lesson and gives the classroom directions. To move from one section to another, there are small arrows icons found on every page. After the learner selects the appropriate course, he or she can choose a desired lesson or topic from the unit menu. It is highly recommended to start with lesson one if the learner is new to the *U.S.A. Learns* program.

In the final menu, a learner will find a list of activities for learning English. After the learner performs the activity, he or she will see a score on the menu. Every activity has directions. The learner can listen, read, and watch a video. Sometimes, the learner needs to read a question and choose an answer or write out, after which he or she can also check the answer. With some activities, the learner can use a microphone to record speech and practice speaking in English, as seen in Figure 3.



The screenshot shows the '1st English Course' interface. At the top, there is a navigation bar with 'My Home', 'Study Tools', 'Help', and a 'Quit' button. Below this is the 'Unit 1: First English Class - Language Practice' header. The main content area is titled 'Activity Menu' and includes a note: 'Click on an activity. Activities with a [checkbox] are completed.' Below this is a table with three columns: 'Activity', 'Completed?', and 'Score'.

Activity	Completed?	Score
Introductions		
Classroom Lesson [icon]	<input type="checkbox"/>	—
First and Last Names	<input type="checkbox"/>	•
Nice to Meet You	<input type="checkbox"/>	—
Your Turn [icon]		
The Alphabet		
Classroom Lesson [icon]	<input type="checkbox"/>	—
Listen for the letters	<input type="checkbox"/>	•
Miguel's Spelling Practice [icon]	<input type="checkbox"/>	—
Spell it right!	<input type="checkbox"/>	•
Spell First and Last Names		
Classroom Practice [icon]	<input type="checkbox"/>	—
Personal Information Form	<input type="checkbox"/>	•
Listen and Speak [icon]	<input type="checkbox"/>	—
Conversations		
Ramon and Ryan [icon]	<input type="checkbox"/>	—
Comprehension Check	<input type="checkbox"/>	•

Figure 3. Recording and watching features.

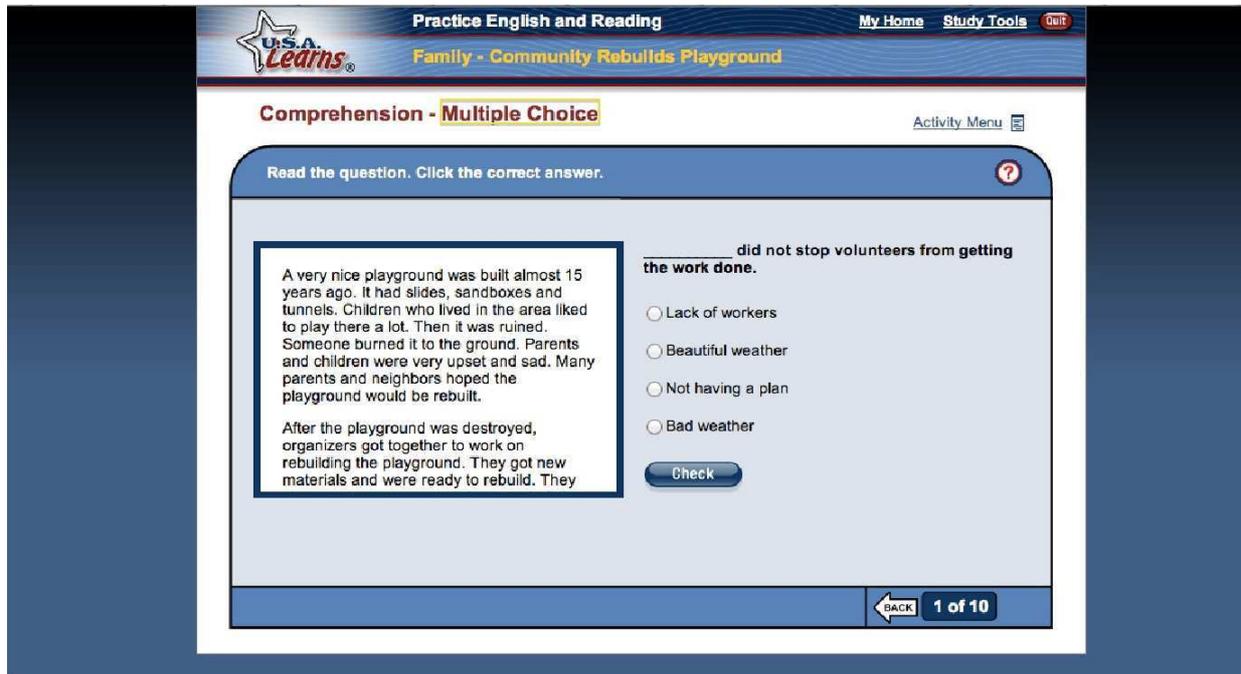
Each unit has a new, distinct topic and starts with an introduction that explains the learning goals, objectives, a list of new related vocabulary and a list of exercises. Activities are of varied types, such as reading comprehension, matching games, listening match, meaning match, concentration, say it, spell it, watch and answer and many others, which are based on real-world involvement such as classroom participation, conversations, directions, law system, weather reports, health issues and so on.

Reading

Some topics help the learner develop reading comprehension skills. They start with easy tasks for beginners and lower intermediates and steadily turn into longer and more complex texts for the intermediate level. The reading activities involve reading about various topics such as family, health, transportation and safety. Every topic has a reading section, which is followed by such exercises as multiple-choice questions, drawing conclusions and many other activities that engage the learner by challenging his or her cognitive abilities.

Furthermore, the learner has the opportunity to rehearse new language and to involve himself or herself deeply in coming to know about others' culture. This activity allows students

to identify and empower their identities and thus enhance the reading comprehension strategies such as skimming and scanning (Cummins, 1986). An example of a reading task is shown in Figure 4.

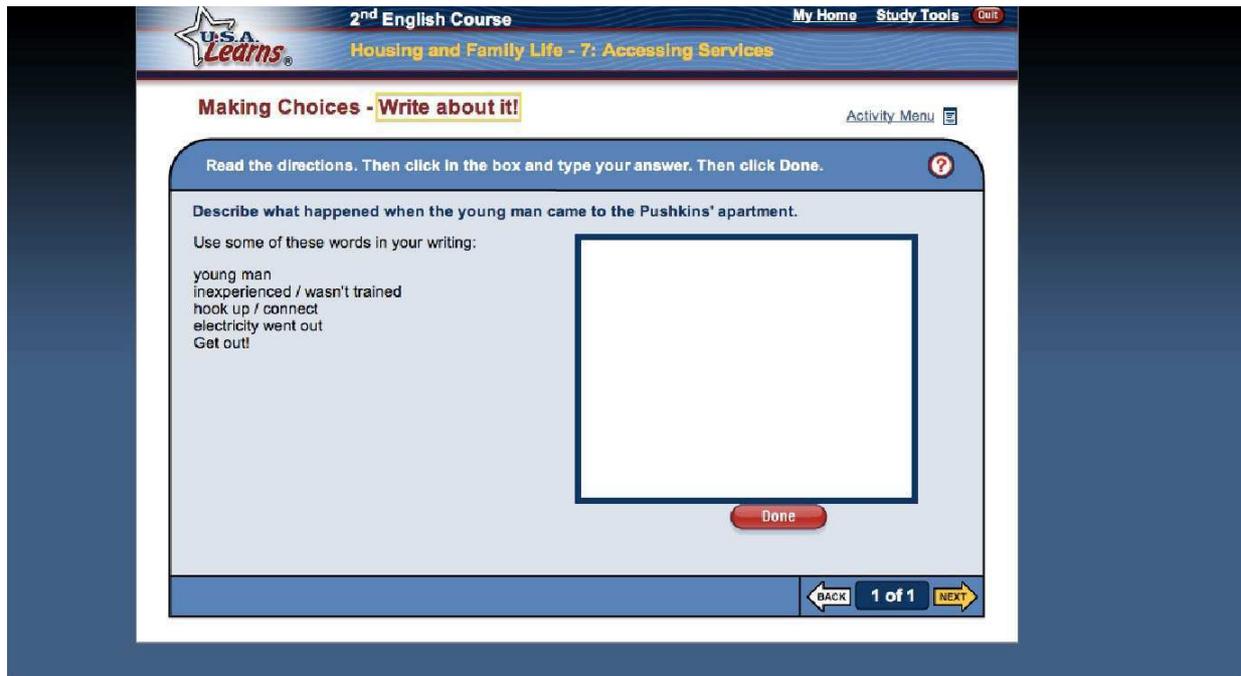


The screenshot shows a web interface for a reading comprehension task. At the top, there is a navigation bar with the logo "U.S.A. Learns" and the text "Practice English and Reading". Below this, the title "Family - Community Rebuilds Playground" is displayed. The main content area is titled "Comprehension - Multiple Choice" and includes an "Activity Menu" link. The task instructions are "Read the question. Click the correct answer." The reading passage is enclosed in a box and reads: "A very nice playground was built almost 15 years ago. It had slides, sandboxes and tunnels. Children who lived in the area liked to play there a lot. Then it was ruined. Someone burned it to the ground. Parents and children were very upset and sad. Many parents and neighbors hoped the playground would be rebuilt. After the playground was destroyed, organizers got together to work on rebuilding the playground. They got new materials and were ready to rebuild. They". To the right of the passage is a question: "_____ did not stop volunteers from getting the work done." Below the question are four radio button options: "Lack of workers", "Beautiful weather", "Not having a plan", and "Bad weather". A "Check" button is located below the options. At the bottom right of the interface, there is a "BACK" button and a progress indicator "1 of 10".

Figure 4. A sample reading task.

Writing

Each topic has a writing exercise section to help learners to develop their writing and reading comprehension skills at the same time. The learner starts by writing a reflection answering an essay question that is directly related to the reading topic. When finished, he or she can print out the written task (see Figure 5).



The screenshot shows a web interface for a writing task. At the top, it says "2nd English Course" and "Housing and Family Life - 7: Accessing Services". The main heading is "Making Choices - Write about it!". Below this, there are instructions: "Read the directions. Then click in the box and type your answer. Then click Done." The task prompt is "Describe what happened when the young man came to the Pushkins' apartment." A list of words to use is provided: "young man", "inexperienced / wasn't trained", "hook up / connect", "electricity went out", and "Get out!". A large empty text box is provided for the answer, with a "Done" button below it. At the bottom, there are navigation buttons: "BACK", "1 of 1", and "NEXT".

Figure 5. An example of a writing task for lower intermediate learners.

Listening

Each topic has listening activities with answers based on prediction. The activities train the listener in predicting the answer through looking for key vocabulary related to the topic and verbal signposts such as *yet* or *so* to help the learner predict the meaning and choose the right option. Also, the activities aim at presenting useful language in context to serve as a model for speaking activities (real-life situations). Other exercises are meant to practice listening skills to develop the learner's ability to accurately catch numbers, dates, names, directions, and other topics. This kind of practice helps the listener identify and note the main argument the participants are involved in (see Figure 6).



The screenshot shows a web-based listening task interface. At the top, the header includes the 'U.S.A. Learns' logo, '2nd English Course', and navigation links for 'My Home', 'Study Tools', and 'Quit'. The main title is 'Housing and Family Life - 7: Accessing Services'. Below this, the task is titled 'Story Start Up - Listen for meaning!' with an 'Activity Menu' icon. A blue instruction bar reads: 'Click Play to listen to the speaker. Read the question and click the correct answer.' The central area features a video player showing a man in a light-colored t-shirt in an apartment. To the right of the video is a question: 'Listen to Victor when he says, "We are never moving anywhere again." What does he mean?' Below the question are three radio button options: 'This apartment is very cheap, so he never wants to move again.', 'Moving is a lot of work, so he doesn't want to do it again.', and 'This apartment has the nicest neighbors, so he doesn't want to leave.' The second option is selected. Below the video player is a 'Rewind' button. At the bottom left, a feedback message says 'Correct! Now click Next.' with two star icons. At the bottom right, there are 'BACK' and 'NEXT' buttons, with '1 of 6' in the center.

Figure 6. An example of a listening task.

Speaking

In each topic, there is a section called *Say It*. It helps the learner practice listening, speaking, and recording his or her voice. These exercises include listening and then pronouncing words related to the topic or a whole sentence that is a part of a story. The learner can click on *Show Text* to make sure he or she has not missed a word. The aim is to help learners develop a sense of confidence in speaking the language accurately and authentically (see Figure 7).

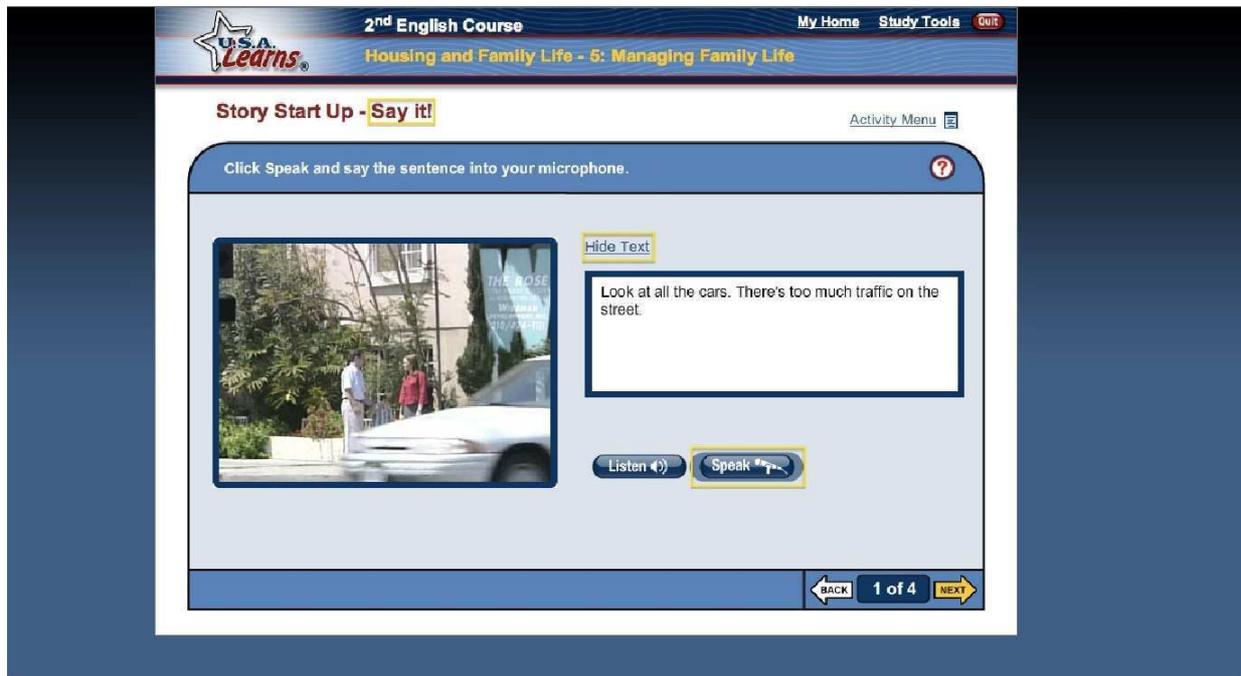
The image shows a screenshot of a web-based English learning interface. At the top, there is a navigation bar with the 'U.S.A. Learns' logo, '2nd English Course', and 'Housing and Family Life - 5: Managing Family Life'. The main content area is titled 'Story Start Up - Say it!' and includes an 'Activity Menu' icon. A central instruction reads 'Click Speak and say the sentence into your microphone.' Below this, there is a video player showing a street scene with cars and people. To the right of the video is a text box containing the sentence 'Look at all the cars. There's too much traffic on the street.' Above the text box is a 'Hide Text' button. Below the text box are two buttons: 'Listen' with a speaker icon and 'Speak' with a microphone icon. At the bottom right, there are navigation buttons for 'BACK', '1 of 4', and 'NEXT'.

Figure 7. An example of speaking activity.

Vocabulary

Each topic starts with a list of new related vocabulary. The activities include written and spoken words in such formats as listening match, say it, spell it, and definition match. These can take two forms - the first form requires matching a word with the appropriate dictionary definition, while the second is more visual as it requires matching a word with a specific picture or image (see Figure 8).

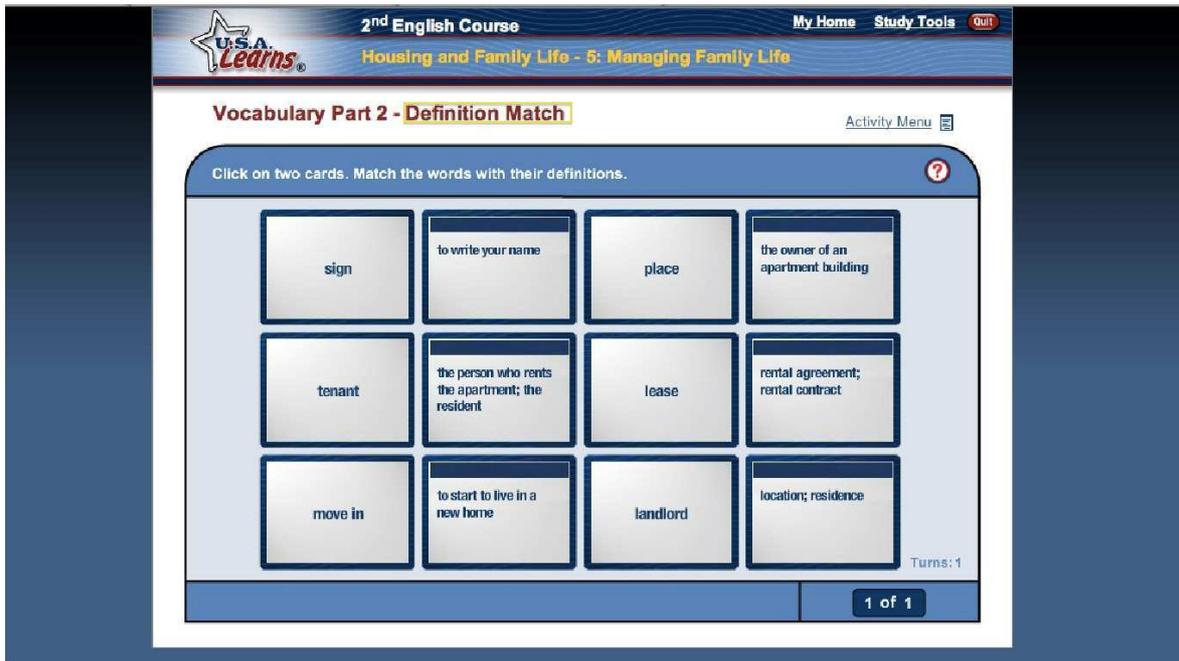


Figure 8. An example of a vocabulary definition match activity.

Grammar

Every topic has a grammatical section to develop the learner's grammar proficiency. The user can learn grammar and meaning at the same time through engaging in authentic conversation. He or she can read and listen to the context of various grammatical rules such as modal verbs and then solve grammatical problems or revise grammatical and spelling mistakes in sentences (see Figure 9).

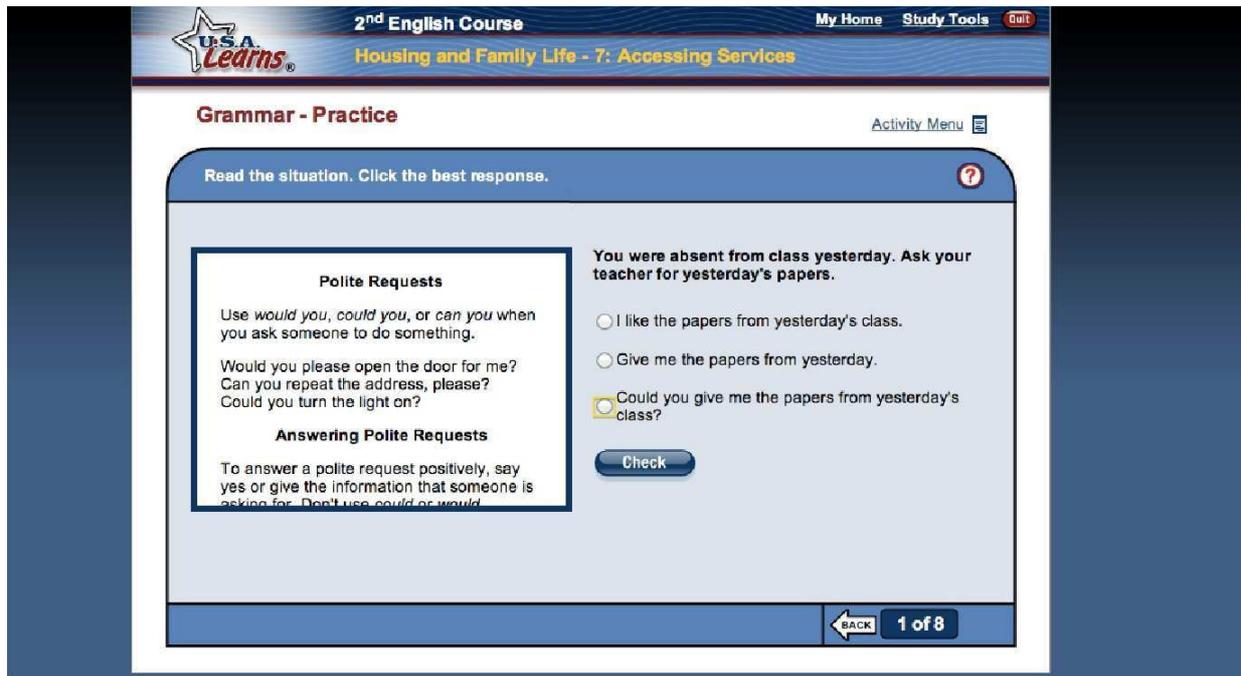


Figure 9. An example of a grammar practice task.

Evaluation

As mentioned earlier, the pedagogical framework provided by Cummins et al. (2007) will be followed to evaluate this software. Their criteria will be used to evaluate the *U.S.A. Learns* program for technology-supported learning activities that will (a) promote deep understanding, build on learners' prior knowledge, and permit learners to control the learning process, and (b) engage learners in extensive reading, support them in accessing curricular content, and enable them to harvest the language they are reading. Therefore, the questions used in the evaluation are as follows:

1. Does *U.S.A. Learns* promote learners' understanding?
2. Does it consider the learner's prior knowledge?
3. Do the learners have control over the learning process?
4. Is it an engaging tool? (Cummins et al., 2007, p. 108)?

In terms of engagement, the *U.S.A. Learns* software provides its users with a variety of interesting topics and a plenty of engaging exercises to enhance the learning process. Furthermore, all the topics of this software are based on real-world written, spoken, and visual

materials and events. As is claimed by Bransford, Brown & Cocking (2000), “[s]tudents can work with visualization and modeling software that is similar to the tools in non-school environments, increasing their understanding and the likelihood of transfer from school to non-school settings” (p. 207). The variety of topics and exercises can attract the learner’s interest and engage him or her in the learning process, thus improving language proficiency.

Most of the topics integrate the four language skills, which might promote the learner’s engagement and learning. Many activities in *U.S.A. Learns* aim at engaging students in active reading or listening followed by writing. Such activities encourage learners to read for more details about the topic. For example, in order to complete the task in Figure 10 successfully, the learner has to read a text or listen to an audio about law and government officers to draw the right conclusion and later he or she needs to write about the same topic.

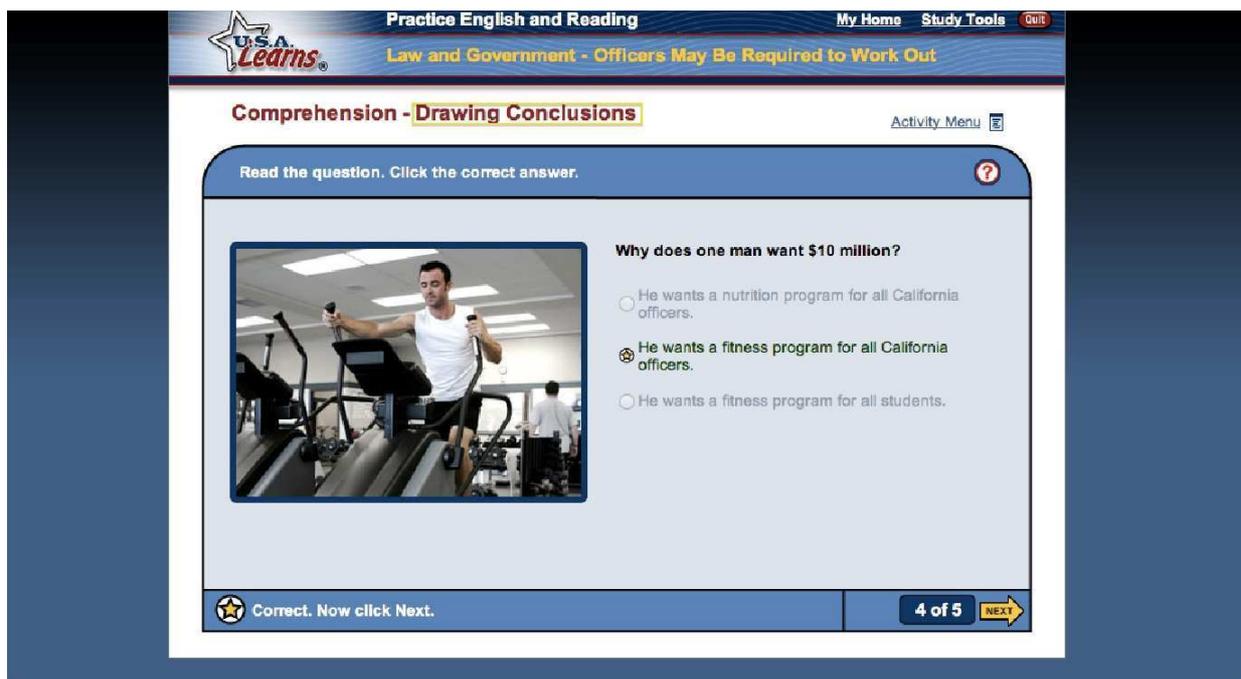
The screenshot shows a web interface for 'Practice English and Reading' on the 'U.S.A. Learns' platform. The page title is 'Law and Government - Officers May Be Required to Work Out'. The current activity is 'Comprehension - Drawing Conclusions'. A question asks 'Why does one man want \$10 million?' with three radio button options. The second option, 'He wants a fitness program for all California officers.', is selected. A feedback message at the bottom left says 'Correct. Now click Next.' and a '4 of 5' indicator with a 'NEXT' button is at the bottom right. The background image shows a man on a treadmill in a gym.

Figure 10. A sample reading and listening comprehension task.

As seen in Figure 11, the learner needs to understand the text or the audio well to select the right meaning of the words. Feedback is given instantly, which means that the learner has to think accurately before clicking on the wrong choice to obtain a good score. This is an example of cognitive challenges for administering the language.

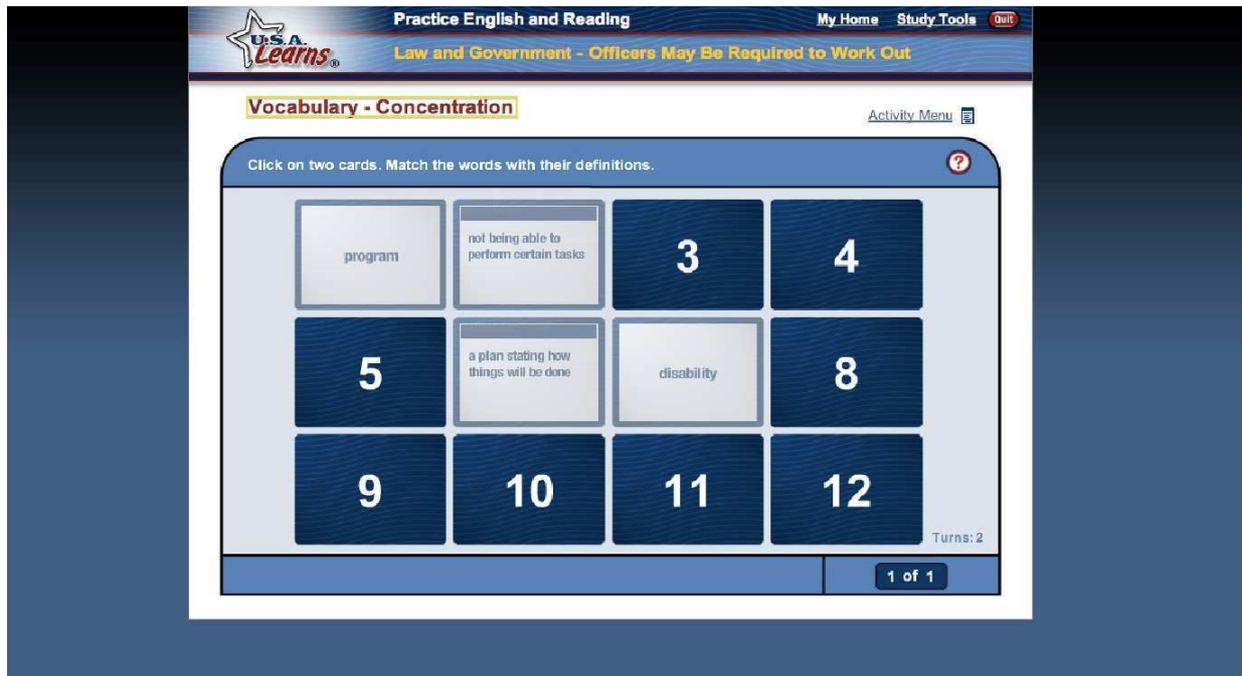


Figure 11. A sample vocabulary practice task based on previous text comprehension.

Moreover, the software provides the learner with the facility to say, record, and listen to his or her pronunciation of new, difficult words that have been chosen from the topic (see Figure 12). Such a task can enhance the learner's pronunciation by offering repeated exercises.

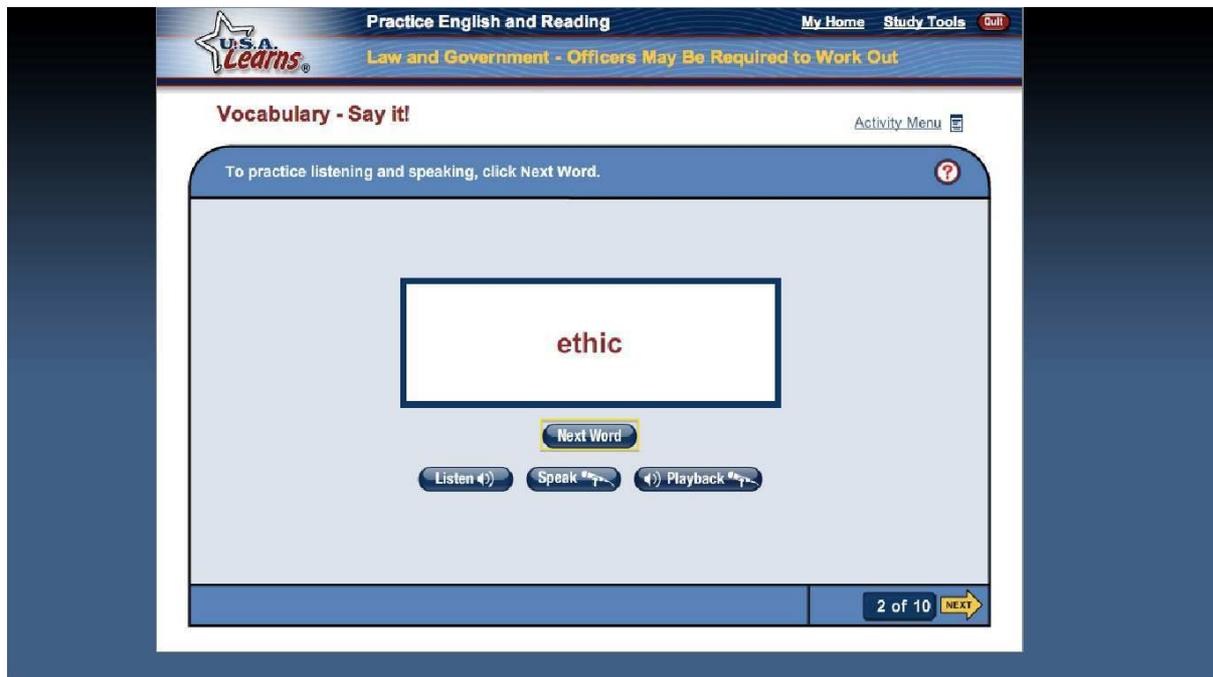


Figure 12. Sample Say it! Task integrating listening, speaking, and recording the learner's pronunciation.

Cummins et al. (2007) emphasize relating the learner's "prior knowledge, skills, beliefs, and concepts significantly influence what learners notice about their environment and how they organize and interpret it" (p. 43). They believe if the task is related to the learner's prior knowledge and background, this would enhance his or her understandings. In the *U.S.A. Learns* program, there are many examples that support this assumption. One is a listening comprehension task about the weather report for beginners (see Figure 13). In this activity, the learner needs to listen to a weather broadcast and select the right picture according to his or her understanding and prior knowledge. Such an activity will help the learner relate ideas from his or her background to what has been said while pictures help to foster a framework for understanding the text. Many such prior knowledge connections can be found within the three different levels and activities in the *U.S.A. Learns* program.

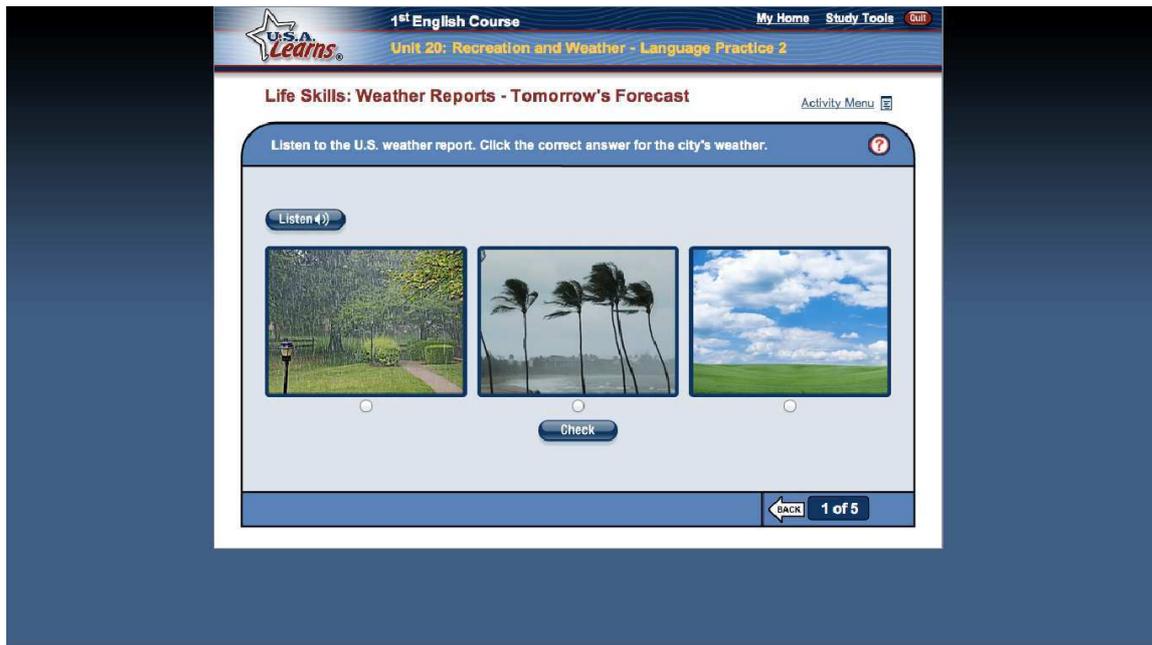


Figure 13. An example of a task involving learner's prior knowledge.

Recommendations

U.S.A Learns is useful software for learning English as a second language for learners from different language proficiency levels with practice activities within each topic that integrate the four language skills through written text, images, videos, and audio recording. The software enhances autonomous learning as it provides the learner with an instant feedback. Moreover, learners with either reading or listening difficulty are also adequately addressed by combining both facilities within each topic.

However, it would be even better if the learner could save what he or she records and writes for a further review from teachers or peers, though the learner can print what he or she writes. It would be more motivating for the learner if the reading activities involved timed scanning as this might develop the learner's reading strategies such as skimming and scanning. Overall, the program appears useful and meets most of the technology framework described by Cummins et al. (2007).

References

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