SOFTWARE REVIEW

Study Skills Success V9

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Introduction

This paper provides a review of *Study Skills Success V9*, a software that offers different activities to practice the skills needed to approach English for academic purposes effectively. It covers reading, listening, writing, speaking, research, critical thinking, vocabulary, grammar, describing visuals, and independent learning. This paper is an attempt to evaluate *Study Skills Success V9* software. It provides general and detailed descriptions of the software and then evaluates it in terms of the pedagogical framework provided by Jonassen (1999) to examine software technology tools.

Product data

Publisher: Clarity Language Consultants Ltd, www.ClarityEnglish.com

Product type: CD or online software for developing academic study skills

Language(s): International English or North American English

Level: Upper intermediate to advanced, adults

Media format: CD-ROM or online, http://www.claritylifeskills.com/

Operating system: CD version: Windows /XP/Vista/7. Online version: Internet connection, browser.

Hardware requirements: CD-ROM drive for installation on individual computers; microphones and speakers or headphones.

Supplementary software: Adobe Flash Player.

Price: CD version: $180 for one computer. For a complete price list, contact: sales@clarityenglish.com Online version: $19.99 for one month (comes as a package with three

general English online software). For more info about the online prices, check http://www.claritylifeskills.com/

Description

Academic English is challenging for many students who are considering attending a university in an English-speaking country or taking English proficiency tests such as *Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL)* or *International English Language Testing System (IELTS).* Students need to practice and master different skills and sub-skills such as note-taking when listening to a lecture, scanning, skimming, reading in-depth academic readings, and using academic writing style. *Study Skills Success V9* is a piece of software that is designed for students who are seeking higher education in an English-speaking country. It aims at providing practice for the skills needed to approach English for academic purposes effectively. The program covers skills of reading, listening, writing, speaking, research, critical thinking, vocabulary, grammar, describing visuals, as well as independent learning (see Figure 1). The online version of the software can be used as a self-study tool by individual students, and the CD version can be utilized by classroom teachers or institutions.

Figure 1. The main menu of Study Skills Success V9.

Study Skills Success V9 software is easy to navigate. After the user accesses the program, he/she can choose from the different units on the menu. To get a general idea about the software, the "Introduction" section contains a video that shows a teacher and some students reflecting on their experiences using *Study Skills Success V9*. Each unit begins with a video that explains what the user is going to learn. Moreover, there are different clickable icons that can be found on every page to allow the user to see the learning objectives of the unit, score, progress, to print, write notes through the notepad, or record his/her speech.

Each unit has extensive practice exercises like drag and drop, multiple choices, fill-in-the-blanks, and open-ended questions that are based on authentic texts such as book blurbs, magazine and newspaper articles, and websites. At the end of each unit, "My learning record" section lists what the student has learned in each unit and enables him/her to write notes in case he/she needs more practice in some areas.

Reading

This unit helps the user develop reading strategies such as scanning, skimming and reading for gist. It starts with sentences and gradually moves up to complex texts. The scanning activities involve timed scanning for the following types of materials:

    (a) a book index so that the user practices how to find information more quickly;

    (b) encyclopedia entries to find specific information;

    (c) extracts from magazine articles to find detailed information in longer texts using key words from the activity.

In order to practice skimming, the activities include skimming academic book titles and blurbs to respond to a prompt; skimming for the topic sentence to help predict the rest of the paragraph; and skimming headings to predict the content of article sections.

After practicing scanning and skimming, the reader practices reading for detail to identify the main points and practice, distinguish between main and minor points in a longer complex text as well as practice summarizing long texts. An example of a reading task is shown in Figure 2.
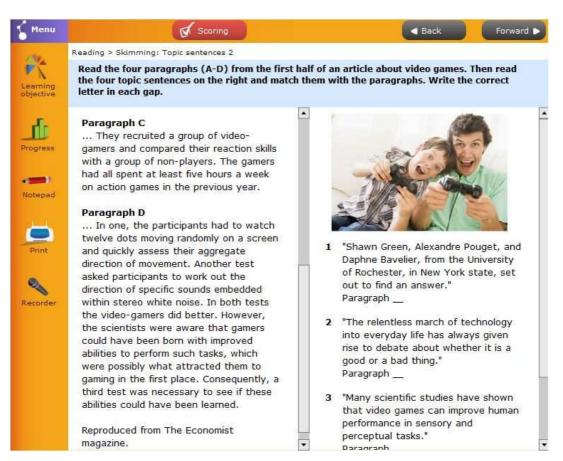
Figure 2. Reading activity sample.

Listening

This unit starts with listening activities in which the answers are based on prediction. The activities aim at activating the listener's prior knowledge of language (collocations and grammar structures) and to encourage logical interpretations. Other listening activities train the listener to predict the answer through looking for clues such as headings, potential vocabulary related to the topic, visuals if there are any, or through the use of "signposts" such as 'yet', 'so', 'on the other hand', etc., which help the listener predict what might come after the signposts. Figure 3 is an example of a prediction listening task exploiting signposting.
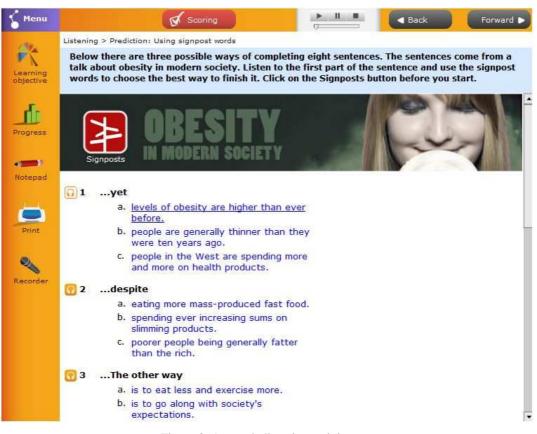
Figure 3. A sample listening activity.

Other exercises are designed to practice listening for details to develop the ability to accurately catch numbers, dates, names, and formulas in a lecture or free speech. At the end of this unit, the user practices listening to more complex discussions as well as writing summaries. This kind of practice helps the listener identify and note the main argument the speaker makes as in lectures and seminar discussions.

Writing

This unit assists the user to develop practical skills that improve his/her academic writing. It provides exercises to practice the following aspects:

(a) analyzing essay questions;

(b) planning an essay;

(c) linking ideas;

(d) using academic style.

The user starts by listening to an audio which provides advice on how to respond to an essay question using certain techniques. These techniques are then practiced, and the user is trained in how to do research for a certain topic. After learning how to analyze essay questions, the user moves on to learn and practice how to (a) plan an essay through a variety of activities such as analyzing essay paragraphs to understand the purpose of each paragraph; (b) structure a discussion essay; (c) write a good introduction; (d) write a topic sentence; (e) improve and connect ideas and paragraphs through the use of linking words; and (f) use appropriate academic vocabulary. The student is scaffolded throughout this unit until he/she becomes ready to write an academic essay in a series of timed and non-timed tasks. The user can also check suggested answers and writing models of certain prompts. A sample writing activity is displayed in Figure 4.
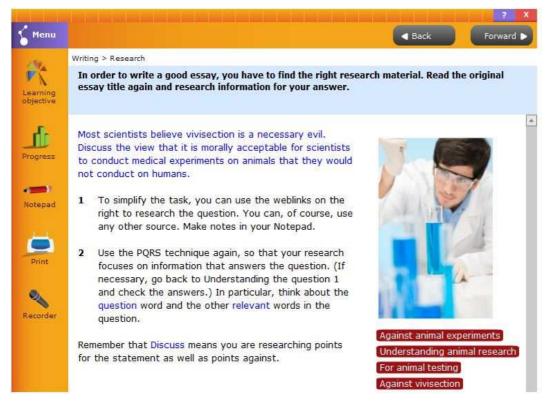

Figure 4. An example of a writing activity.

Speaking

This unit helps learners develop a sense of confidence to express ideas in social and academic settings through practicing giving opinions and presentations as well as discussing ideas. The

unit starts with activities that help the user practice finding things to talk about when discussing topics such as family or their hometown. The user also learns how to give a short talk about a certain topic in one or two minutes as well as how to express opinions about different topics, also controversial ones. Additionally, the user learns how to give a presentation through watching a video of a short seminar presentation and then answers related questions such as "Does the speaker use visuals appropriately?", "How does the speaker conclude the presentation?" Another task emphasizes the use of clear "signposting" in a presentation such as *My subject today is..., my second point is..., I am going to focus on..., for instance..., to sum up...*etc. Moreover, the user practices how to plan his/her presentation through learning different stages for planning a presentation. Finally, the user is supposed to give a presentation, and, if possible, videotape it in order for him to check his/her performance. Furthermore, in other tasks, the user listens to a seminar discussion, analyzes the phrases the students use, and learns how to interact with other students in a seminar discussion. Figure 5 is an example of a speaking activity.
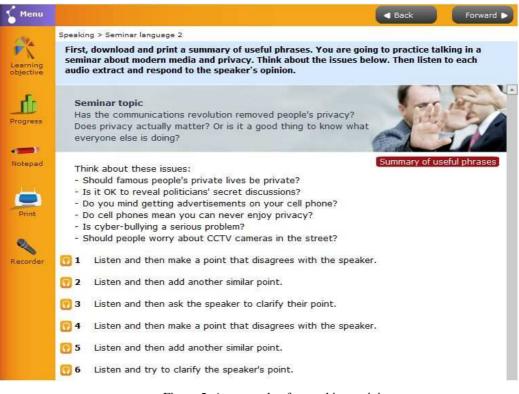

Figure 5. An example of a speaking activity.

Research

In this unit, the user develops techniques to make writing research papers more effective through practicing how to: (a) find the right information; (b) take notes; (c) credit sources. The user starts with a task in which he/she analyzes the stages of the research process and learns how to organize his/her research. Also, in order to learn about the resources available for research in a library, the user listens to a university librarian describing how to make use of library resources and then answers related questions.

Furthermore, the user is offered other activities such as how to (a) assess usefulness of articles and books before reading them thoroughly, for example, reading an abstract and content pages; (b) evaluate websites in terms of, for example, the reliability of information; and (c) take notes using the Cornell system as well as how to use abbreviations in note-taking.

To understand the importance of crediting resources, the user listens to an audio about plagiarism and then engages in tasks such as analyzing a bibliography of books and articles and learning how to write accurate bibliography references. Moreover, the user practices in-text citation through studying examples of academic citation and practices writing accurate citations. Figure 6 is an example of a research activity.

Figure 6. A sample research activity.

Critical Thinking

In this unit, the user watches a video about the meaning of critical thinking and the strategies needed to be successful in academic settings. The unit focuses on four significant components: (1) understanding arguments; (2) evaluating the evidence; (3) recognizing problems with an argument; and (4) avoiding plagiarism.

The unit starts with yes/no statements which test students` understanding of critical thinking. For instance, 'Humza sometimes changes his opinion half way through his research' is a statement in which students have to identify whether it is an example of critical thinking or not. It is worth mentioning that such exercises provide students with the opportunity to think critically. That is, the user is not just supposed to select 'yes' or 'no', but he/she is indeed questioning and evaluating to choose the best answer.

In other tasks, the user reads a short argumentative passage and completes a summary, reading between the lines to write it. Furthermore, the user learns how to evaluate evidence by answering true/false questions, fill in the blanks, select between fact and opinion statements, and so on. In addition, students learn about plagiarism in academia. Figure 7 provides an example of a critical thinking task.
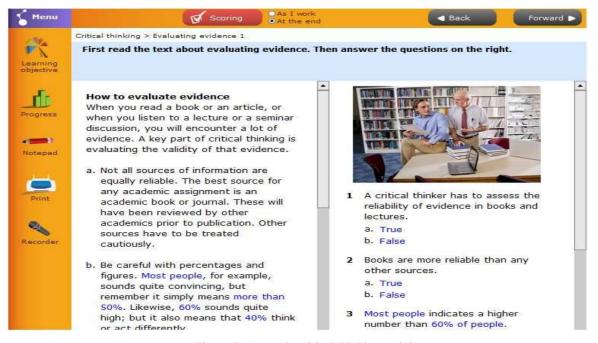

Figure 7. A sample critical thinking activity.

Vocabulary

In this unit, the user learns and practices techniques and strategies to assist him/her with unknown words, both academic vocabulary and specialist words. The unit combines written and spoken discourses. The practice activities include:

(a) figuring out the meaning of words from context;

(b) using a dictionary to answer questions about the meaning, spelling, pronunciation, grammar, and usage of word;

(c) using a thesaurus to find synonyms and antonyms;

(d) exploring word families and the use of prefixes and suffixes to change meanings;

(e) learning specialist vocabulary.
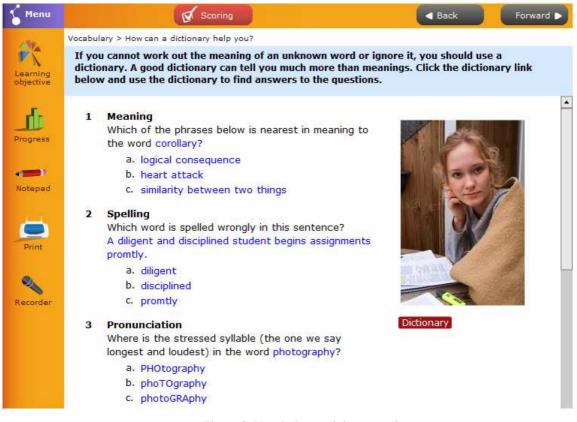
Figure 8 shows an example of a vocabulary activity.

Figure 8. Vocabulary activity example.

Grammar

This unit helps the user improve the accuracy of his/her academic writing through learning how to eliminate, improve, and solve grammatical problems. The practice exercises include: (a) analyzing grammatical mistakes in sentences; (b) using grammar books effectively; (c) learning about the most common grammar errors; (d) revising grammar rules of the present and past tenses and practicing using them in academic writing; (e) practicing proofreading; (f) practicing accurate use of punctuations; (g) revising the rules of tense changes in reported speech; (h) examining the use of modal verbs in academic writing, and (i) practicing using a reference book to solve grammar problems. An example of a grammar activity is displayed in Figure 9.
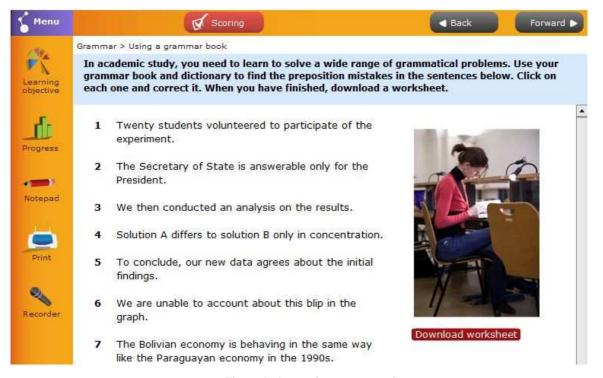

Figure 9. A sample grammar task.

Describing Visuals

In an academic paper data are very often presented in tables, charts, or graphs. In this unit, the user learns and practices how to describe, evaluate, and create visual data. The user starts with a task in which he/she learns about the effectiveness of visual presentation of data. Activities that follow include (a) recording numerical data in a table; (b) describing a technical process; (c) describing procedures in a flow chart; (d) using correct verb forms to describe charts; (e)

describing a line graph; (f) using phrases of approximation such as 'approximately', 'a large number of', etc. to describe visuals; (g) interpreting data and stating conclusions; (h) talking about visuals; (i) using the correct written language to refer to visuals; and (j) creating visuals to present data. Figure 10 shows an example of a describing visuals activity.

Figure 10. Describing visuals activity.

Independent Learning (Study Skills)

This unit helps the user become a more confident and independent learner through learning how to manage time, how to become a more effective learner, and how to prepare successfully for exams. Practice activities include: (a) understanding how to manage time more effectively; (b) planning and prioritizing the stages of an assignment; (c) helping identify the user's strengths and weaknesses and thinking about ways to improve; (d) using teacher's feedback to improve academic work; (e) learning how one can remember more information; (f) learning how to prepare for an exam; (g) identifying the best ways to practice English outside the classroom; and (h) learning about the importance of adapting to cultural differences. An example of an independent learning task is shown in Figure 11.
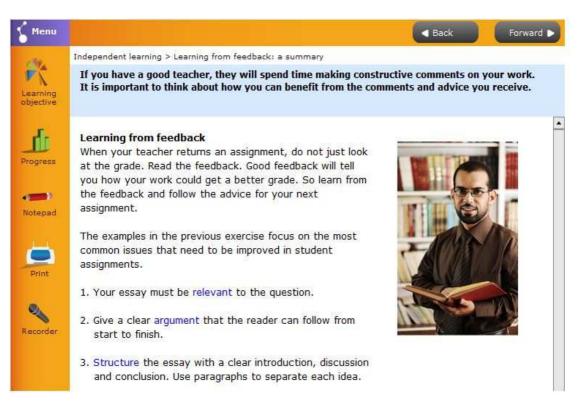
Figure 11. Independent learning task.

Evaluation

As mentioned earlier, Jonassen's pedagogical framework (1999) will be followed to evaluate this software. This framework helps analyze to what extent "computer applications are being used as mindtools to generate knowledge and promote critical thinking" (Cummins, Brown & Sayers, 2007, p. 111). Accordingly, the following key dimensions will be considered to evaluate the software: (a) engagement, (b) generativity of knowledge and critical thinking; (c) control (Jonassen, 1999). This section attempts to answer the following questions: Does *Study Skills Success V9* engage the user, generate knowledge, and support critical thinking? Does it permit the user to control the learning process?

In terms of engagement and generativity of knowledge and critical thinking, *Study Skills Success V9* is rich in topics and tasks which are based on authentic written and spoken discourses from magazines, newspapers, encyclopedias, books, and websites. We think that the variation in topics, practice exercises, and support materials enhances generativity of knowledge and critical thinking and may result in more engaged learning. For instance, in the "Critical Thinking" unit, the user immerses himself/herself in different tasks that require him/her to think critically in

order to analyze and evaluate different texts. All units involve tasks that require the user to build upon prior knowledge, brainstorm, and analyze. The user also practices describing academic data through analyzing charts and tables. We believe that such tasks could support critical thinking and promote engaged learning.

Moreover, we see that the integration of different language skills in all units may increase the user's engagement and learning. For example, in order to complete the task in Figure 12 successfully, the user has to listen to an audio about cloning from the *New Scientist* magazine, take notes using the "Notepad" on the left side of the page, and read the text well to figure out the meaning of the words from context. In addition to that, the user can read the text aloud and record it via the "Recorder" option on the left side of the screen. This would help the user check his pronunciation, or he/she might ask a teacher or a colleague to listen to his/her reading and provides him/her with feedback.
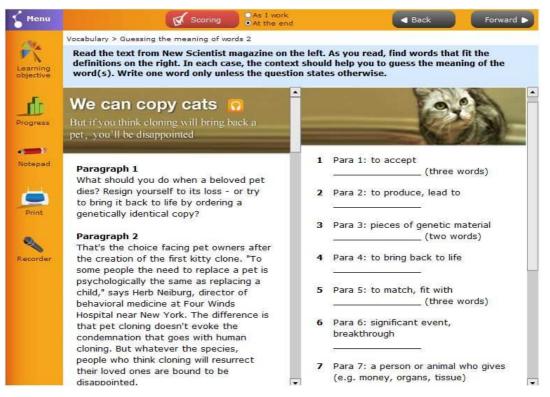

Figure 12. Example of integrated skills task

In addition to working on different language skills, the user also develops knowledge about academic issues such as plagiarism and citations. However, we think that the lack of student-

student interaction might be a shortcoming of *Study Skills Success V9*. That is, although the software does offer a variety of tasks to practice different speaking sub-skills such as giving opinions and making presentations, it does not provide live interaction with people via streaming. This is a pity, given that the user is provided with an account on the software's website. It would add to its value if students could engage in discussions so that they can practice speaking.

In terms of controlling the learning process, *Study Skills Success V9* software has consistent layout throughout all units. This permits the user to control the learning process by smoothly navigating through different units and options. Moreover, the user can check his/her progress anytime through clicking on the "Progress" icon on the left side of the page which appears in all units (see Figure 12). Additionally, the user can find out more about his/her performance by clicking on "Scoring". Based on his/her score, this option enables the user to control the learning process by re-taking the task, viewing the answers, or getting feedback (see Figure 13).
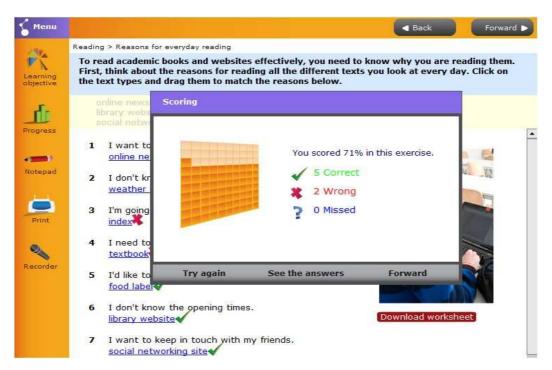

Figure 13. Scoring screen.

Recommendations

We think that *Study Skills Success V9* is a useful tool to practice academic English. We fully recommend it for both teachers and students as it covers all the language skills and components needed to approach English in academic settings. The countless number of practice activities in each unit that integrate reading, writing, speaking, and listening through written texts, visuals, videos, and audios can be a great resource for students and teachers. The online version can be very beneficial for self-learning students who are seeking to improve themselves academically or planning to take a proficiency test. The CD version, on the other hand, can be incorporated by classroom teachers or institutions in academic or test preparation courses.

References

Cummin, J., Brown, K., & Sayers, D. (2007). *Literacy, Technology, and Diversity: Teaching for Success in Changing Times.* Boston: Pearson Education, Inc.

Jonassen, D. H. (1999). *Computers as Mind-tools for Schools: Engaging Critical Thinking (2ⁿᵈed.).* Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall.