# English Central

*Naji Rashed Obaid*

## PRODUCT AT A GLANCE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Product Type</strong></th>
<th>Educational software using daily videos to help users comprehend and communicate through the English language</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Language(s)</strong></td>
<td>Accessible in 11 languages, including Chinese, Turkish, Spanish, Portuguese, and Arabic</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Level(s)</strong></td>
<td>Available in three levels of difficulty: Beginner (Levels 1 and 2); Intermediate (Levels 3 and 4); and Advanced (Levels 5, 6, and 7)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Interaction</strong></td>
<td>Learning activities include exercises in listening recognition, vocabulary enhancement, refinement of pronunciation, basics of composition, and a review of grammatical constructions</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Media Format</strong></td>
<td>Online (requires neither download nor installation)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Hardware and Operating Requirements</strong></td>
<td>Requires speakers, a sound card, and a microphone; runs on any Internet-connected device, such as desktop/laptop computer or smartphone</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Price</strong></td>
<td>Comes in five plans: (1) Free: limited to two videos and one tutoring lesson. (2) Premium (starting at $15 per month): unlimited videos and one tutoring lesson earned for every 600 points accrued through correct answers. (3) 1 Per Day (starting at $36 per month): unlimited videos and one tutoring lesson per day. (4) 2 Per Day (starting at $60 per month): unlimited videos and two tutoring lessons per day. (5) Platinum (starting at $89 per month): unlimited videos and unlimited tutoring lessons</td>
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Description

English Central is an online software program designed to teach various skills of conversation and the basic vocabulary of English. The program is available in 11 different languages, including Chinese, Turkish, Arabic, Spanish, Portuguese, and Korean. Non-native English speakers can use one of these languages to access the website and its various learning materials. According to the program’s homepage (www.englishcentral.com), English Central is a leading provider of online conversation solutions, combining the Internet’s best English videos, a proprietary Intelligent Speech Assessment Technology, an adaptive vocabulary learning system, and live tutors, all of which are delivered seamlessly to computers and mobile devices.

Users enjoy a welcome lesson, and every topic in the course’s platform contains at least ten units that have comprehensive lessons in conversation. The software also offers different activities for grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, reading, writing, and speaking. Each activity focuses on a particular sort of conversation arising in everyday life, such as those associated with business engagements, social interactions, travel, academic encounters, and so on. Those who initiate a lesson but then stop prior to its completion can complete the exercise at a later point. The program will mark their placement and remind them where to resume their training.

Evaluation

Technological Features

English Central is a web-based program available on any device with an Internet connection. The software can run on the Mac OS 10.10, as well as through Chrome OS-supported browsers, including Google Chrome, Internet Explorer, Safari 7 and higher, and the latest version of Firefox. We have successfully tested the platform on a MacBook, using Safari’s version 8.0 browser, as well as on a Windows machine with the last version of Chrome. The app for this program is also available through the App Store and Google Play. When we tested it on both platforms, it performed without any issue.

Once users have created an account at www.englishcentral.com, they can receive two videos and one tutoring lesson for free. Activation is sent by email and, within a few minutes, students can access the materials with their username and password and then set up the platform in any of the languages offered. Overlay instructions help users navigate lessons, and quizzes let them determine both what they have learned and where they still have room for improvement. Videos are broken up into sections and arranged with instructions on grammar so users can better comprehend the principles of effective sentence structure. The layout of the online courses is generally easy to
navigate and self-explanatory; anyone with basic computer knowledge can use this program.

As illustrated in Figure 1, the software’s features are clearly indicated. The main section of the program (on the left) is comprised of two units of videos and courses. Every group has a topic and a set of associated skills. Topics are arranged into categories such as Business, Media, Social, Travel, Academic, and Kids, and each topic includes numerous videos and distinctive content. The Courses tabs on the homepage also include topics and skills. These units have sub-units like those mentioned above, but they also include what is named a test-preparation option in the skill tab. By navigating the central portion of this program, learners can choose from several options and begin their learning journey. On the right side of the display users can see all the videos and lessons, while working with voice-recognition software and practicing words, phrases, and pronunciation (Figure 1).

Each lesson contains an introduction facilitated by an audio and video document. The audio introduces the pronunciation of words and reviews the use of sentences in the associated dialogue. The sound quality is good, and the native speakers involved articulate sounds in a clear and easily understandable manner. Video content pertains mostly to interaction in daily life and culture, with some videos offering subtitles and transcripts. Learners can record themselves through the voice-recognition feature by repeating what the native speakers have said, and they can then compare their results to the native speaker’s benchmark, receiving feedback on their pronunciation of
various words and phrases. Learners can also record a sentence displayed on the screen (Figure 2), and the program will immediately score them on their pronunciation while also offering a visual representation of any errors they might have made (Figure 3).

![Figure 2. Record Feature.](image)

Overall, the website provides easy and intuitive navigation. Another benefit is that learners can sign up for a daily email update on lessons and vocabulary. At the bottom of the main page, tabs such as FAQ, Contact Us, Blog, and Contact Support offer users additional support.

**Pedagogical Features**

The program’s instructional section (see Figure 1) has six topics, and every topic has a minimum of 10 units (videos). Each video learning unit contains four parts (Watch the video, Learn the words, Speak the lines, and GoLive), allowing learners to take a tour of the lesson. In addition, at the end of the unit, there is a vocabulary quiz and a lesson plan (see Figure 4). The lesson plan allows users to learn the objectives of the lesson, such as grammar, syntax, or sentence structure.

Lesson units have a list of vocabulary pertaining to the topic’s focus (e.g., the World Cup, family events, etc.). The pronunciation tab in the skills section has dialogues provided by a native speaker of English. Whenever the video offers a live event or a conversation (for instance by a reporter), the conversation is
subtitled and illustrated by a picture. Such visual tools help learners to listen and read the vocabulary and dialogues while also learning the conversational basics for each topic. In addition, at the end of every video, a word-choice exercise allows the learner to select a video that plays a sentence using that particular word, before determining the word or words that are missing in the exercise.

Every unit offers an assessment section containing activities such as word writing and word recognition. Learners can practice the vocabulary and sentence structures they have learned in each group, and, at the end of the video,
they will find a vocabulary quiz allowing them to gauge their understanding of the lesson. Activities for the videos associated with each unit can be found by clicking on My English (Figure 5). The My English button has five sections: My Lessons, My Videos, My Courses, My Words, and My Pronunciation.

The My Videos section includes all the videos a learner has already viewed; the My Courses section compiles the courses for which a learner has registered; the My Words section features a learner’s favorite words, correct and incorrect words, and known words; and the My Pronunciation section offers an IPA phonology table where users can select a sound that they wish to hear, along with a video showing the areas of the mouth and throat that are activated by that sound’s articulation. Here, learners can also click on the articulation of the sound and see its pronunciation. Figure 6 shows how the system illustrates the pronunciation of the vowel /I/.

Teacher Fit (Approach)
English Central activities are rooted in a theory of technology integration. That is, teachers and learners can use technology to perform familiar activities more effectively and to reshape those activities. The program teaches English conversation in a simple way that learners can easily adopt, and the technology allows learners to adjust their own learning process while enjoying access to information their teachers may not be able to provide (Lam & Lawrence, 2002; Pourhosein & Gilakjani, 2017).
The concept of technology integration comes from language acquisition theory, under the impact of an online English language tool to improve speaking proficiency, as well as the development of computer-assisted vocabulary learning (CAVL). Learners, in other words, are given the opportunity to handle tasks independently outside the classroom (Schmitt, 2008).

Drawing on the notion of communicative competence (Canale and Swain, 1980), English Central is geared toward helping learners become better speakers. Features like videos ranked by degree of difficulty appear well-suited to helping students receive optimally comprehensible input. In addition, the system includes the ability to repeat and slow down phrases, allowing learners to check both their spelling and their pronunciation. A ranking system also motivates learners with graduated levels of difficulty.

English Central boasts some interesting features that help students receive feedback on vocabulary and pronunciation. Specifically, learners become more autonomous and get feedback immediately following any learning activity, allowing them to better monitor their progress and recognize their mistakes, while drawing on corrective input and redoing exercises as needed. Likewise, teachers can take advantage of the videos that offer several contextualized tools and are conceived in a purposeful, structured, and integrated fashion to meet the needs of learners of all types and enhance the educational process.
Learner Fit (Design)
Motivation is the key to learning a language through an online program (Grabe & Stoller, 2002). One noted theorist, Gardner, has argued that language learners must have “the combination of effort plus desire to achieve the goal of learning the language” (Gardner, 2000, p. 14). Because English Central provides multiple activities and different topics that the learner can explore, learners will likely be motivated to learn English in this way. For example, a learner who wants to go on a trip can choose the travel topic and be exposed to multiple activities to help them acquire the language skills needed in travel situations. All the themes are general, so users may need to adapt the information to their particular needs in different situations.

Even though this program has a repeat feature for vocabulary, learners must memorize these vocabularies. Teachers in the classrooms may be able to use this program as a supplement to existing courses to reinforce vocabulary and provide additional contexts. Indeed, English Central provides more instant feedback on language instruction and learners’ pronunciation and fluency than a regular teacher can, although a feedback from a teacher is usually more personal and adapted to each learner.

Summary
Overall, the English Central program offers a positive learning option for both teachers and students. For teachers, the program can be used as a supplement to a language course and as a way of exposing learners to new topics, activities, and opportunities for oral comprehension practice. For learners, English Central provides more instant feedback and may offer the chance to refine pronunciation and increase fluency with regular feedback during tutorials, a feature often missing from language courses.

The program also provides a speech-assessment option for learners, allowing users to improve their pronunciation by using the website’s technology pronunciation assistant tool. This option takes advantage of the 100-million-plus utterances stored on the website.

This review should not be construed as an endorsement of English Central. While the benefits are many, users should note that the program is costly, and also susceptible to the usual issues associated with technology, including hardware and software issues. As with any online system, the ideal situation is for a language learner to combine it with their language courses in order to increase exposure to language output.
References


Producer Details

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Reviewer Information

Naji Obaid is a PhD candidate in Linguistics and Applied Linguistics at Arizona State University. His research interests include technology-enhanced second language acquisition. His current research project examines the differences of the Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCT) of non-native English teachers and native English teachers who teach English to local students in an American context.