Issues in English 2

Reviewed by

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PRODUCT AT A GLANCE

Product Type:
Tutorial, drill and practice

Language:
International English, North American English

Activities:
Listening comprehension, matching sound/word, matching sound/picture, writing, listen and repeat, reading/note taking, summarizing, error correction

Media Format:
CD, network licenses available

Operating Systems:
Windows 98/2000/Me/XP

Hardware Requirements:
Pentium 200 MHz+; RAM, as recommended for version of Windows used; hard disk space, 650 MB to download CD on hard disk (available only to purchasers of multiuser licenses); 4X CD-ROM drive; 16-bit sound car; microphone/headset or speakers; VGA+ video (600x800)

Documentation:
Online, Email Protea Textware for technical support; printed manual, includes troubleshooting guide

Price:
Single user, CD $120.00US + shipping; home user, $60 (no tracking or record keeping modules); site license, 5 users $240, 10 users $360, 20 user $480, 21+, contact producer

GENERAL DESCRIPTION

The Issues in English 2 program is being marketed as “an interactive multimedia computer program for literacy and English language learners” addressing reading, writing, and listening as well as grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation. According to the developers, the program is designed for beginning to advanced learners 12 years of age and older, including adults. Each unit comprises short videos, sound recordings and playback/record capabilities as well as a variety of interactive exercises. Answer sheets can be printed for most exercises with access to the answer sheet being denied or enabled by the instructor.
The software is a CD accompanied by a hardcopy of a manual. Users find instructions on each screen inside each unit. Clicking on an icon gives a spoken version of the written instructions. Holding the mouse over any icon for 2 seconds brings up a tool tip with information about the function of that icon.

A Program Administration Module (PAM) is bundled with Issues in English 2 (except in the Home User version). With this module, teachers can manage class records; track learners; manage passwords for printing worksheets, tests, and answer sheets; as well as print reports and delete records.

Background
The Issues in English 2 program follows the first production in this series called, simply, Issues in English. The strengths of the earlier program, evaluated by Turnbull (2000), are found in the new volume which is based on the same pedagogical principles as the first. In this second volume, designers have simplified the design features, improved upon certain self-access features, and replaced the original issues (topics) with eight new ones.

EVALUATION
Technological Features
The program was installed and run on a Pentium III using Windows 2000. According to the publishers, any multimedia computer with Microsoft Windows 98 or higher and the recommended accompanying hardware, RAM, and processor recommended for Windows can be used.

Home users must have the CD in the computer drive to use the program. When installing the software with a full license setup, however, one can download the media files to the hard disk or a server. Pages are uncluttered and use muted colors that are restful for the eyes.

Activities (Procedure)
Eight topics (or “issues”) form the basis of the course material: languages, technology, media, immigration, wilderness, sports, fame, and education. Users begin by selecting one of four levels (beginning to advanced) and then selecting one of the eight topics (see Figure 1).

Each topic begins with a video clip. The videos in the first three levels consist of two talking heads having a short dialogue about the theme, conversations moving from just two exchanges in the first level to six in the third level. Level four uses an interview format instead of a dialogue. The text of the dialogue can be hidden or revealed as learners wish. If the text is selected, certain words are highlighted in blue. Students can discover their definitions by clicking on them (see Figure 2).
After viewing the video clip, learners can review the video, read a transcription, and select from a list of activities under the main headings of Getting Started, Listening, Vocabulary, Grammar, Pronunciation, and Writing. The focus of the activities remains the same in all the units throughout the same level. For example, if “prepositions of time” appear in the Immigration Issues, they also appear in each of the remaining seven “issues.” The prepositions examined in each unit will not be the same ones, of course, but all will be prepositions of time.

Also consistent throughout each unit in a level is the type of exercise. Most include cloze, dictation, error identification and correction, recording words or sentences, comprehension questions, and, from level two up, writing summaries.

Each activity opens in “learn” mode but can be changed to “test” mode when desired. The test mode uses random samples from the activities found in “learn” mode. In test mode, learners cannot refer back to the video. Records may be kept of student progress in both modes if the Program Admin Module is installed.

Most activities have an information button that brings up a detailed account of how to proceed with the activity as well as information about the content of the activity, perhaps a review of a grammatical point or a short discussion of stress and intonation (see Figure 3).

Figure 3
Information on Past Perfect

The linguistic objectives of this program are extensive and broadly based. On the one hand, the program offers examples of natural spoken English for examination by users in order to increase vocabulary, improve speaking and listening, understand grammatical features of the language, write summaries, and respond to prompts that lead the learner to a particular rhetorical topos (e.g., define, describe, argue, etc.). The real strength of the program, however, comes from the assumption of critical thinking on the part of users, an assumption that is not unwarranted in that the issues themselves are presented engagingly but with a seriousness of purpose that encourages users to concern themselves with the content and not just with improving linguistic skills.

Teacher Fit (Approach)

As in the first volume of this series, entitled Issues in English, Issues in English 2 holds as its underlying assumption (as stated in its accompanying manual) that learning requires a meaningful context. Using the same format as in the earlier volume, Issues in English 2 successfully weds language and content starting with the first activity of each unit—the video. Each video is based on a debatable issue, overtly polemical in the lower level dialogues in which each speaker holds a different position and more subtly expressed in the upper level conversations and interviews. The video establishes a problem-based learning approach that carries over into the learning activities to varying degrees. The texts of the videos provide the lexical base for all accompanying exercises.

The exercises themselves derive from the integrated skills approach in the design of each module, developing the resource material extensively yet unobtrusively. Students who complete a unit will have worked on all four areas in addition to vocabulary and grammar, but it is unlikely they could do so working alone.

The program claims to be designed for self-instruction, and so it is in activities involving recall of factual knowledge, but activities involving the metacognitive level such as most of the writing exercises really require a teacher. The information buttons accompanying most exercises do provide additional information for users, but, as is so often the case with “help” items, all pretense of interactivity disappears, and, as in the grammar sections, users are looking at a screen with information laid out as in a 1970s grammar handbook—and just about as understandable. In addition, like Mr. Paperclip in the early versions of Word, the help feature sometimes presupposes knowledge on the part of users that may be unwarranted, as in the exercises on pronunciation in which the importance of listening to stressed syllables is discussed at each level but learners are never told exactly what constitutes a syllable. (According to the publisher this oversight will be rectified when the software is republished in the relatively new future.)

Linguistic accuracy is not problematic in this program, in spite of the caveat to users that because the videos are portraying real speech, certain mistakes or elements of colloquial speech may appear. There is an odd suggestion that comma rules are amorphous and perhaps a matter of individual whim. “Different people have different ideas about [commas]. If you are not sure about whether or not a comma should, or could, be used in a particular place in a text, please ask your teacher, or a friend.” This may be a covert attempt at directing students toward constructivist learning, or perhaps it is the expression of the program developers’ frustration with differences between North American and UK comma rules. At any rate, it is an admission that users need to go beyond the program to seek help.

Teachers, then, are helpful in order to introduce or clarify issues of grammar and lexis, but they are indispensable in the pronunciation exercises since there is no feedback for learn-
ers other than to compare their pronunciation with that of the speaker in the exercise. In this case, the program would need to be run through a class management system that allows teachers to monitor students’ work and comment as needed.

The writing exercises also require teacher feedback, and not just in the more advanced activities involving summarizing and writing in what are called different “genres” (but are more accurately identified as the different topoi or “places of argument” found in most standard textbooks on academic writing). A lazy student producing nonsensical answers in the writing exercises will receive a gratuitous “great work!” audio comment simply by having typed in one or two words in response to each question.

Understanding the need for positive reinforcement, the program designers offer a visual check mark and an encouraging comment such as “Very well done!” to indicate a correct answer to an exercise question. But the enthusiastic “Fabulous!” “Great work!” “All right!” after every correct match in level one can become wearisome. In level four, it is downright silly when users need to be given a hint for every letter in a vocabulary lesson and then are treated to an effusive “That’s great!”

For purposes of realistic feedback as well as analyzing patterns of error and suggesting remedies, a teacher’s skills are needed.

The high degree of interactivity between student and software does not leave much room for group work while using the program. However, many follow-up activities could take place in the classroom after a lab session: peer editing of writing samples, retelling or oral summaries of different units, webquests to follow up on the issues, role plays of dialogues and interviews, to name a few.

**Learner Fit (Design)**

The *Issues in English 2* manual states that the program is designed for “literacy, ESL, and EFL learners … 12 years of age and older.” The structure of each unit as well as the layout and design features make it attractive to those who have almost no experience using computers including retired seniors or users who have no computers at home and who are working on their own in libraries or other public institutions. Once inside the program, however, one discovers navigation is not wholly intuitive. Users in this category would be better off with a printed handout or live teacher explaining how to navigate through some of the exercises. For example, when learners misplace words in an exercise such as that illustrated in Figure 4, they hear “Try it again”—and this only after clicking the check mark. However, it is not until users click the check mark a second time, perhaps by chance, that the speaker says how to discover navigation is not wholly intuitive. Users in this category would be better off with a printed handout or live teacher explaining how to navigate through some of the exercises.

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Users who are accustomed to running the cursor around the screen to discover the possibilities will likely find out what they need to know on their own. Others will need help, but, in either case, the navigational tools are logical once one knows what they are.

The content suggests relatively serious users, no matter the age. Speakers in the videos all appear well dressed and well spoken, whether teenagers or adults. The conversations are not frivolous, even if the subject is, say, Elvis Presley, as in Fame in level one. The issue here is whether the singer was a lucky or an unlucky person as demonstrated by examples given by each speaker. Learners are then led to consider the questions of what determines a good life rather than being asked to focus on elements of Presley’s music or personality that are probably of little interest to most young people today. This is not to say the entertainment personages are all from the 1950s. Annie Lennox and Chuck D also appear in the Fame category.

Figure 4

Drag and drop vocabulary exercise

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Level one, the “beginner” level, is more accurately a high false-beginner level. Certainly the definitions offered to level one users who click on the highlighted words in the video transcripts are not suitable for real beginners. At the same time, the definition of “lucky” as “has good luck” seems to suggest that “has good fortune” or a lengthy explanation would be inappropriate for level one. For the most part, however, definitions are useful and often given through a photo or graphic. Clicking on “Germany” brings up a little map of Europe with Germany highlighted. (Perhaps an image of a lottery winner would take care of “lucky” being defined with a form of itself.)

Lexis, syntax, and content all point to advanced users in level four. Video clips of television interviews and documentaries are directed at native speakers of English. Interviews with the former President of Portugal, Jorge Sampaio (whose name is misspelled in the video field although not the exercises—an error to be corrected in the new edition) regarding immigration, Chuck D of Public Enemy speaking about technology and the music business, and Mayada Halai, a young Muslim woman training to be a boxer in the African boxing champion-
ship for women in Cairo are representative of people expressing themselves thoughtfully and intelligently on issues upon which learners of all ages and experience can readily be encouraged to give opinions. On the other hand, if learners’ interests do not extend much beyond shopping and film stars, it is unlikely they will find this program attractive.

One wonders if language level and age are perhaps too closely tied in this program. Unless of an academic bent, a young teenager with intermediate English language skills might find that the material lacks interest, though one with lower skills would manage with the beginner level. In other words, it is difficult to see the material appealing to 12-14 year olds who would be working at level three or four, though adults at any level would find it interesting.

The greatest weakness of this program for learners working independently is in error correction. In the Listening exercises, learners listen to a text while an incorrect version appears in print. They click on each word that is different from what is heard. It is not immediately apparent that one needs to click each different word and then click on the check button before going to the next activity in the “learn” mode. “Press the forward arrow” might also be confusing since the natural reaction is to press the play button just under the exercise.

As in proofreading, one can stare at the error correction exercises for long periods of time without seeing the problem. Compounding the difficulty is that up to half the words in the sentence may be incorrect, so one needs to listen to the recording countless times before finding all the errors. Some users may be frustrated when discovering that noting a difference has precedence over correctness. For example, in Figure 5, we see the words that differ from those in the recording have been clicked upon (as indicated by underscoring), correctly identifying a difference. The spoken text is “They have provided a wider range of options from which to choose.”

Figure 5
Error Identification Exercise

The second part of the exercise displays the incorrect text and asks learners to type in the correct words. In the exercise above, when all words except “chose” are corrected, it is possible, either accidentally or deliberately, to click the forward button and move to the next sentence. Users are thus led to believe the sentence “They have provided a wider range of options from which to chose” is correct.

SUMMARY
Those who give it a cursory examination can easily underestimate the program. A potential purchaser no doubt begins with the frozen smiling faces on cubes of the level one exercises and wonders if the original version was typed in WordStar. But if one ignores this inauspicious beginning, one finds that the content is certainly more impressive than that of similar programs.

Although the program works best with a teacher, the exercises and tests do permit users to learn through drill and practice on their own, particularly with listening comprehension and vocabulary. While the graphics are far from remarkable, visual as well as auditory learners should find the program appealing since both modes of delivery figure heavily in the activities and support one another.

One does not usually comment on “tone” in a software analysis, but it is a pleasure to see a language learning program that meets learners respectfully and at a high level rather than dumbing down the material in order to fulfill what are perceived, usually incorrectly, to be learner desires. The extent to which the material is exploited for development of all four skill levels makes it useable for most classes using a skills-based curriculum.

SCALED RATING
(1 low - 5 high)
Implementation Possibilities: 4
Pedagogical Features: 4
Sociolinguistic Accuracy: 4
Use of Computer Capabilities: 3
Ease of Use: 3
Overall Evaluation: 4
Value for Money: Single User 3, Home/Site License 4

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