

Nguyen, P. (2016). eEnglish by Pronunciation Power [Review]. In J. Levis, H. Le, I. Lucic, E. Simpson, & S. Vo (Eds). *Proceedings of the 7th Pronunciation in Second Language Learning and Teaching Conference*, ISSN 2380-9566, Dallas, TX, October 2015 (pp. 290-295). Ames, IA: Iowa State University.

SOFTWARE REVIEW

eEnglish by Pronunciation Power

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Increasing interest in pronunciation teaching and the growth of computer technology has facilitated the development of various software and websites focusing on pronunciation. In fact, teachers and learners of English as a second language (ESL) have been presented with a proliferation of pronunciation software such as *Accent Master*, *American Speechsounds*, *Better Accent Tutor*, *Connected Speech*, *Pronunciation Power*, to name but a few. A recent website, *eEnglish.com*, published by *Pronunciation Power*, an established standalone pronunciation practice program, offers an inexpensive and engaging experience to independent ESL learners who wish to improve their pronunciation.

DESCRIPTION

For USD 8.99 a month, learners can have access to various packages for pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar, namely, *Pronunciation Power 1* (PP1) and *Pronunciation Power 2* (PP2), *Pronunciation Power (PP) Idioms*, *8 in 1 Dictionary*, *Beginner Grammar with Color Key*, *Vocabulary Builder*, *Speech Test*, and *Phonics Games*. Prior to their first pronunciation lesson, learners are required to take a speech test to identify the sounds that are more challenging to them so that they can focus on these sounds while practicing. In this test, learners are asked to read and record 52 sentences containing English sounds, including 18 vowels, 23 consonants, and 11 cluster sounds. The recordings are then analyzed with an automatic speech recognizer (ASR). Learners are then presented with a list of all English sounds in phonetic symbols, each underlined with a different color indicating whether this sound can be ignored, needs more practice, or needs additional attention. After that, learners can proceed to other packages to improve their pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar.

Two packages specifically designed for pronunciation are PP1 for beginner and intermediate levels and PP2 for intermediate and advanced learners. In these packages, learners are provided with lessons on each individual sound as well as many exercises for practice on the sound. In the *Lessons* mode, learners can see illustrations of how the sound is produced from both front and side view while they listen to the sound and then access to the *Speech Analysis* function, which gives them a spectrogram of the target sound. At this point, learners can record their sound, which is then analyzed by the ASR, and compare their spectrogram to the virtual instructor's (Figure 1). In the *Exercises* mode, learners can listen to sample words and comparative words of the sound they are practicing and may record them to compare with the words produced by the virtual instructor. The listening discriminating exercises give learners some minimal pair practice in which they listen to two individual words containing the sound and complete a sentence with a

word they hear. Additionally, learners can practice the target sound at suprasegmental levels, either sentence stress, word linking, intonation and rhythm, in S.T.A.I.R. (Stress, Timing, Articulation, Intonation and pitch, and Rhythm) exercises. An example of a practice in intonation is presented in Figure 2. The final type of exercise is sentence practice in which learners listen to ten sentences containing the target sound, make recordings of these sentences and compare them to the model sentences.

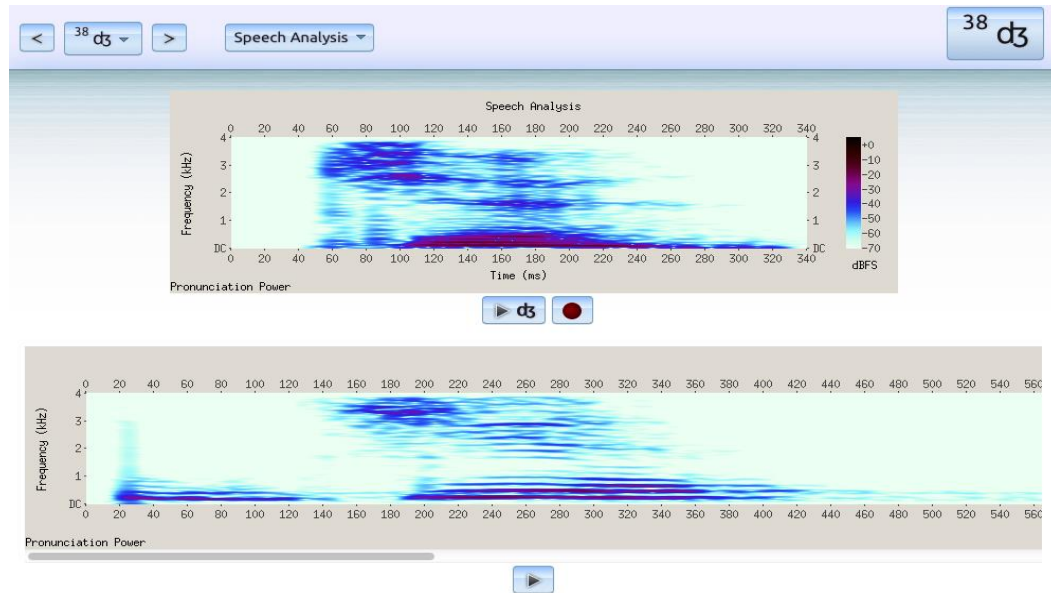


Figure 1. Spectrogram comparing model pronunciation (above) with learners' (below)

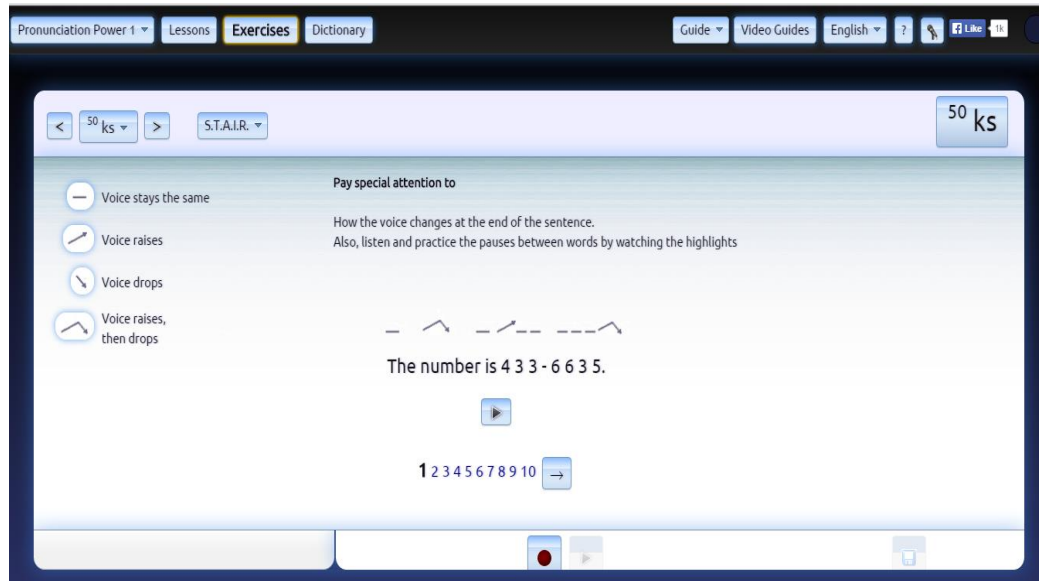


Figure 2. An example practice in S.T.A.I.R

Other packages provided by *eEnglish* include *PP Idioms* with lessons for 104 idioms, each of which is accompanied by a visual illustration, an audio - written example, and many multiple choice exercises which can be scored automatically and provide learners with feedback on their incorrect answers. The *8 in 1 Dictionary* enables learners to search the meaning of a word alphabetically or phonetically and provides them with an explanation in an addition of 12 languages, mostly with a visual illustration (Figure 3). In addition, a different site on 20 basic English grammatical features, accompanied by a pretest, many exercises and a post test, is linked to *eEnglish* to help beginner learners improve their grammar. To improve their vocabulary and to assess their master of the English sounds, learners can have access to *Vocabulary Builder* which provides translations of English words to 12 languages and allows them to make recordings of individual words which will be analyzed by the ASR to identify sounds problematic to them. The last feature is *Phonics Games* in which learners are presented with words visually, logographically and aurally and asked to identify the sound it contains.

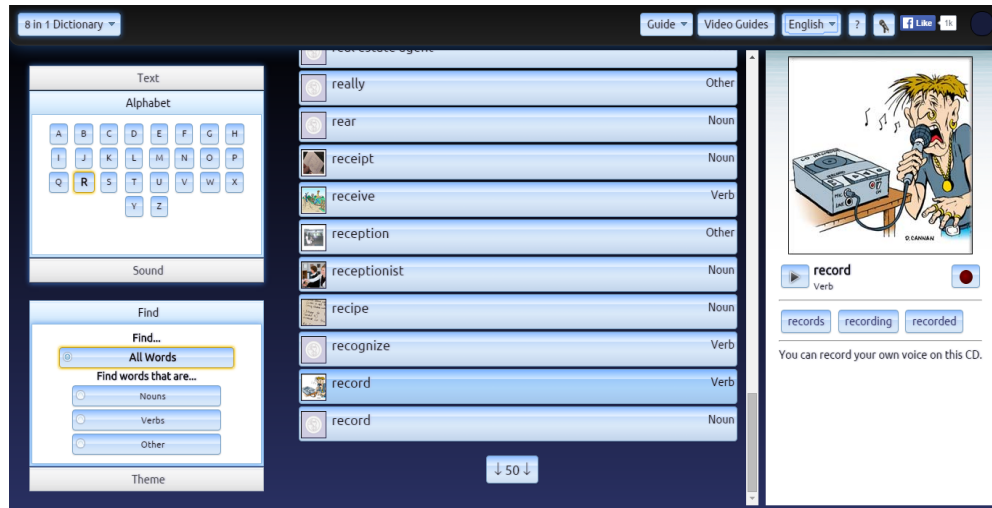


Figure 3. A screenshot of *8 in 1 Dictionary*

STRENGTHS

One of the most useful features of this online learning site is the speech test administered at the beginning of the course. In this test, learners are diagnosed with problematic sounds which they can focus on while working on the site by producing multiple sentences containing the English sounds, a method supported by pronunciation researchers (Levis, 2007). Levis (2007) has argued that computer-assisted pronunciation teaching (CAPT) system should “assist learners and teachers in prioritizing pronunciation topics by channeling learners toward typical vowel and consonant errors for their language backgrounds” (p. 188). This diagnostic test could provide more personalized pronunciation lessons and motivates learners to choose the content that meets their needs.

Another advantage of this site is that, since it incorporates *Pronunciation Power*, it not only focuses on the segmental level but also provides practice at suprasegmental features such as sentence stress, intonation, rhythm and word linking, as evident in exercises in S.T.A.I.R. These features are presented visually with icons such as arrows showing rising or falling intonation, or big and smaller dots showing stress, which have been proved to be valuable pedagogically (Chun, 2007). Although the exercises, focusing on only one suprasegmental feature for each target sound, are not communicative, this inclusion is in line with suggestions made by many pronunciation researchers that suprasegmental features should also be attended to in pronunciation instruction (Celce-Murcia, Brinton, Goodwin, & Griner, 2010; Derwing & Rossiter, 2002).

In addition, a strong characteristic of *eEnglish* is the logical order of a lesson’s components. For example, learners are first instructed how the target sound is produced and then presented with listening exercises to help them distinguish contrastive minimal pairs. In these stages, learners can repeat what they hear to practice producing the sounds either in words or sentences and

replay the recordings to compare their pronunciation with that of the native speaker instructor. Although more communicative activities in the production stages are not included, the lessons are logically organized from description and analysis, listening discrimination and controlled practice of sounds following the teaching phases suggested by pronunciation researchers (Celce-Murcia et al., 2010).

The ability to give instant feedback is another strength of this online learning site as supported by pronunciation searchers (Neri, Cucchiaroni, Strik, & Boves, 2002). Since Flege and Wang (1989) argued that acquiring pronunciation, similar to acquiring syntax in that students need help noticing what they are doing, giving instant feedback can facilitate students' ability to identify through self-monitoring (Celce-Murcia et al., 2010).

Last but not least, in inclusion of various features in the site might motivate learners and facilitate independent learning. Learners can have access not only to pronunciation lessons and practice but also to grammar, vocabulary, dictionary and relatively engaging pronunciation games, which hopefully help them gain other aspects of the language necessary to speaking. The information about their usage, test results and guide achievements can help students keep track of and set goals for their learning.

POSSIBLE IMPROVEMENTS

Some improvements that the site's developer can make are related to the type of feedback to learners' production, the attractiveness and usefulness of the games, the accuracy of instructions in languages other than English and the compatibility of speech analysis software.

First and most importantly, the feedback given to learners could be more comprehensible and thorough to learners, which is usually a problem for CAPT systems (Levis, 2007). First, learners are presented with feedback only to their speech test, their production of the target sounds in isolation and the listening discrimination activities. Second, when learners' production of a single sound is analyzed, a spectrogram of their sound is given, which is usually neither transparently interpretable to learners (Levis, 2007; Neri et al., 2002) nor accurate (Kim, 2006). Also, it is difficult, even for native speakers of English, to achieve the same spectrogram as the model speaker. Therefore, spectrogram feedback is of little value to learners. Third, although it is good that learners have opportunities to record their production and compare it to the model speaker's, it would be more beneficial if an accurate ASR system was incorporated to check for comprehensibility, since sometimes students fail to distinguish the difference in the sounds they produce and more appropriate ones.

Second, the games that learners have access to could be more motivating and useful. Although the pronunciation games (*Phonic games*) can be fun and engaging, they focus only on learners' receptive skills. Incorporating games requiring learners to produce the target sounds in a various

game formats would be more attractive and useful to learners, since they will have opportunities to produce the sounds they have just learnt and check if their learning is successful.

Other necessary improvements include the accuracy of instructions in other languages and the compatibility of speech analysis software. It is useful to have instructions in PP1 and PP2 in 12 different languages. However, the translation of these instructions, at least to Vietnamese, is incomplete and inaccurate, which can be confusing, especially to learners of lower proficiency levels. Also, *eEnglish*'s developers would have to work more to improve the compatibility of the speech analysis software so that it can work with Window 7 or Vista, 64 bits.

CONCLUSION

Despite the aforementioned drawbacks, *eEnglish* can be considered a useful tool for improving pronunciation, considering its reasonable price and useful features. While prices of other pronunciation programs or the standalone *Pronunciation Powers* are more pricy, starting from approximately USD 75 (*American Speechsounds*), *eEnglish* offers learners access to many packages at a less expensive price. The diagnostic speech test, the instant feedback provided by ASR system and the integration of multiple features other than pronunciation are some highlights of the website. This website is appropriate for independent learners who wish to practice pronunciation at the time convenient to them.

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