- A Beneficial Complement to Understanding and Using English Grammar

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MyEnglishLab – A Beneficial Complement to Understanding and Using English Grammar

MyEnglishLab is an online learning management system that accompanies many textbooks published by Pearson. This paper describes MyEnglishLab for *Understanding and Using English Grammar, Fifth Edition* by Betty S. Azar and Stacy A. Hagen (UUEG). MyEnglishLab can be used as an independent resource, a supplement to the textbook, or a substitution for the workbook. Based on their needs, students can purchase only the MyEnglishLab access code card, textbook with MyEnglishLab, or the textbook, workbook, and MyEnglishLab bundled together, respectively.

This essay argues that MyEnglishLab is a beneficial tool for both students and teachers in a blended learning environment. Specifically, the essay describes why and how MyEnglishLab will be incorporated in the English as a Second Language (ESL) program in the fall of 2017 at Tidewater Community College (TCC), Virginia Beach, Virginia, United States.

Who Are the Target Students?

MyEnglishLab for UUEG is designed for intermediate to advanced English language learners (Azar and Hagen, 2016). At TCC, MyEnglishLab will be used in two face-to-face composition courses - ESL 31 (high-intermediate) and ESL 41 (advanced) – that meet two (100-minute sessions) or three (70-minute sessions) times a week. Each class consists of up to 20 adult language learners, both immigrant and international, from various first language and cultural backgrounds. All learners are high school graduates who have prior English knowledge but have been placed into these composition courses based on the ESL placement test. The ESL program at TCC is a not-for-credit developmental program that prepares English language learners

(ELLs) for college-level academic work in four skill areas – listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

What Are the Learning Goals and Objectives?

The learning goal of MyEnglishLab for UUEG is to improve students' understanding and usage of grammar in both spoken and written as well as informal and formal English. The learning objectives are not stated on the MyEnglishLab website, but based on the content of the program, the author of this paper concludes that the learning objectives are the following:

- by taking diagnostic tests, students will become aware of what they already know and what they still need to learn about a given grammar topic;

- by completing practice exercises, students will acquire new grammar skills used in all four skill areas – listening, speaking, reading, and writing;

- students will reinforce the material learned in class at their own pace by accessing available grammar charts and videos;

- students will increase their vocabulary size

How Will the ESL Students at TCC Benefit from MyEnglishLab?

The ESL Committee at TCC has decided to incorporate MyEnglishLab into its two composition courses because the program fosters language learning and improves technology related study skills. Linguistically, MyEnglishLab promotes comprehensible input, comprehensible output, autonomy, and automatization. In addition, MyEnglishLab helps students improve their computer and electronic literacy skills.

Beatty (2013) explains that one of the advantages of CALL technologies is that they provide students with access to comprehensible input. Although the ESL students at TCC live in an English-speaking country, many of them do not have access to or choose not to seek extensive

amounts of interesting and relevant comprehensible input that is necessary for second language acquisition (SLA) (Krashen, 1981). Upon completing their ESL classes for the day, the students often return to their first language environment either at home or workplace.

MyEnglishLab includes more than 500 practice exercises and grammar explanations that provide input in multiple modes-text, audio, and video. The input is made comprehensible and relevant with high-interest themes and contextualized practice often accompanied by pictures or photos. Additionally, each chapter includes a vocabulary section where potentially new words are listed along with their meanings and model sentences.

Swain (cited in Beatty, 2013, p. 89) argues that the production of comprehensible output is also necessary for SLA. By completing practice exercises, students receive immediate feedback. Students not only find out their correct and incorrect answers but can also correct their answers by accessing explanations for their incorrect answers or watching available grammar videos. Although the practice exercises follow the behaviorist model by including multiple choice and drag-and-drop tasks, the Grammar and Writing section gives students an opportunity to construct their own paragraphs or essays based on their own knowledge and experience. These constructivist tasks encourage students to write about their own interests, connect the information from the prompt to their prior knowledge, and draw conclusions.

According to Beatty (2013), CALL technologies foster autonomy in multiple ways. MyEnglishLab presents an opportunity for learners to study on their own at their own pace. Since MyLanguageLab is not a lockstep program, students are able to direct their own learning to meet their individual needs and learning styles. Following the constructivist model, MyEnglishLab allows students not only to move between sections in a given chapter but also between the chapters of the entire textbook. The diagnostic test in each chapter informs the

learners about what they already know and what they need to learn about a specific grammar topic. Slaouti, Onat-Stelma, and Motteram (2013) argue that most adult learners are goal-oriented, benefit from relating learning material to their prior and current experience, and learn best when developing their own learning objectives. Additionally, since MyEnglishLab is accessible not only on desktop computers but also on tablets and mobile phones, it accommodates the demands of adult life and presents an opportunity for individual learning at a flexible schedule.

Hagen (2017) explains that in order to acquire a second language, learners need to make certain skills automatic. Automatization moves these skills from our working memory to procedural memory and makes room for acquiring more complex skills. MyEnglishLab offers extensive grammar practice in an incremental form. Exercises are sequenced from easy to more complex to reduce the working memory load. MyEnglishLab also helps students memorize some grammar structures, such as irregular past tense and past participle forms, gerunds and infinitives, and preposition combinations with verbs. By memorizing these structures, students make them automatic and free their working memory for more advanced tasks.

Gilbert (2013) states that English for Academic Purposes (EAP) programs should have two focuses – language competency and study skills. Regarding study skills, there are three kinds of skills that learners can acquire with MyEnglishLab. First, MyEnglishLab gives students an opportunity to read and navigate digital text and hypertext. Second, the program may also serve as the first exposure to a learning management system. Thus, students learn how to complete various types of electronic tasks, submit them for assessment, and track their progress. Third, not all adult learners are digital natives. Therefore, MyEnglishLab offers an opportunity to improve computer skills, such as word processing.

How Will the ESL Teachers at TCC Benefit from MyEnglishLab?

MyEnglishLab offers teachers an e-text, diagnostic and assessment tools, the answer key, and PowerPoint presentations. The e-text with embedded audio is a helpful in-class presentation tool that provides various functions, such as zoom and drawing tools. No longer will the teachers have to photocopy textbook pages. Diagnostic tests at the beginning of each chapter inform the teacher of the students' prior knowledge and assist in lesson planning. Each chapter also includes three tests – a grammar test with multiple choice and drag-and-drop questions, a writing test, and a speaking test. These tests inform the teacher of the skills acquired and those needing reinforcement and review. The answer key and PowerPoint presentations help teachers with content accuracy and class presentation.

How Will MyEnglishLab Be Used at TCC?

At TCC, MyEnglishLab will be incorporated in a manner that guarantees program consistency, academic freedom, and student choice. Certain sections of the program will be used by all instructors and students, while others will be selected by faculty members and/or students based on need.

All students in ESL 31 and ESL 41 will purchase the bundled materials – textbook, workbook, and MyEnglishLab, which is the most economic choice ($65.00) when both a paper textbook and a supplemental resource (either the workbook or MyEnglishLab) are required. MyEnglishLab will only be used outside of class since some classrooms are not equipped with computers and class time will be dedicated to collaborative tasks. The paper workbook will also be used based on teacher and student needs.

Before beginning a new chapter, teachers assign students the diagnostic test that is due the night before class. The results help teachers target their students' needs more effectively. For

students, the diagnostic test results raise awareness of their skills and prepare them for the next

chapter. Practice exercises will be selected by teachers and learners to accommodate

differentiated and customized learning. Since MyEnglishLab will be used in both ESL 31 and

ESL 41, ESL 41 students will have access to ESL 31 sections for more practice and review.

Teachers assign review sections and chapter tests to all students, and they are due on the day the

in-class grammar test is given. Writing and speaking tests will not be administered since they do

not relate to the learning objectives of the courses. The required sections of MyEnglishLab have

to be completed in a timely manner by all students to pass the course. The scores of the review

sections and chapter tests will be averaged and count toward the participation grade (5% of the

total course grade). These assignments are designed to be low-stake to prevent plagiarism.

Furthermore, although the chapter tests are graded electronically and would lighten the workload

for the teacher, the teachers will administer paper-and-pencil grammar tests in class to assess

students' productive grammar and writing skills more thoroughly. Specifically, in these in-class

tests, students are required to handwrite complete sentences with not only correct grammar but

also correct spelling, capitalization, and punctuation.

How Could MyEnglishLab Be Improved?

Beatty (2013) argues that, "collaboration is among the most useful ways in which

learners acquire language at the computer" (p. 108). Beatty explains that when two or more

people (student-student or student-teacher) collaborate, they negotiate meaning through

scaffolded instruction. MyEnglishLab, unfortunately, does not include any collaborative tasks

between students. The Grammar and Writing Exercises provide only a one-time interaction

between student and teacher where the teacher can provide feedback and the student is allowed

to rewrite his assignment once.

Additionally, the e-text could be improved with the addition of the type function. Currently, the teacher is not able to fill in answers by typing. Rather, the teacher needs to use the drawing tool or write the answers on the board.

Finally, although the availability to the textbook answer key is helpful to students who study independently, some teachers may wish to hide the answer key from students to promote learning. The teacher simply needs to remember to complete this step when she or he is creating a new course.

Conclusion

Although MyEnglishLab does not include collaborative tasks, it is a beneficial complementary tool both for students and teachers in a face-to-face classroom. In order to optimize this technology and significantly improve the quality of learning and teaching, teachers and curriculum developers need to consider their specific learning and teaching contexts and decide what their students and teachers can realistically achieve by using this program (Chen, 2011). TCC will incorporate only those sections and features of MyEnglishLab that meet the student and teacher needs and the learning objectives in its local context.

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