Title	*Introductory English Grammar and Vocabulary with Color Key*
Publisher	English Computerized Learning Inc.
Contact information	#208, 5405-99th Street Edmonton, AB, Canada T6E 3N8 E-mail: info@englishlearning.com Website: http://www.englishelearning.com/
Type of product	Downloadable or as part of an online subscription
Platform	Windows 95/98/2000/NT/ME/XP Power Macintosh 8.6/9X/OS X
Minimum hardware requirements	Requires Internet connection Other information is not available

Price	Downloadable version: $49.95 USD
	On-line Subscription (includes 5 products):
	  90 Days - $49.70 USD
	  180 Days - $79.70 USD

Overview

Introductory English Grammar and Vocabulary with Color Key is a software application designed to help beginning English learners acquire and remember basic grammatical concepts and vocabulary in English. The program focuses on teaching basic grammatical issues by enhancing the parts of speech, each of which has been assigned a specific color to prompt learners to notice the word order of these grammatical structures.

This product is available for download from the publisher's website; thus, it requires an Internet connection for downloading and running the product. It is also available as part of an online subscription, which includes four other products, also delivered via the Internet. I cannot make any comments on the complexity of the downloading process since I was provided with a CD-ROM for the review. The publisher's website, however, offers trouble-shooting for any technical issue that a customer might encounter while downloading or using their products. Information is available on their support page, which also allows for contacting tech-support directly.

Figure 1. Main window: Choosing the language of instruction

Introductory English Grammar and Vocabulary with Color Key is available in 10 languages (as shown on Figure 1), which allows learners from any of these backgrounds to receive instructions in their native language. Once the learners have chosen the language of instruction they can enter the program by clicking on it.
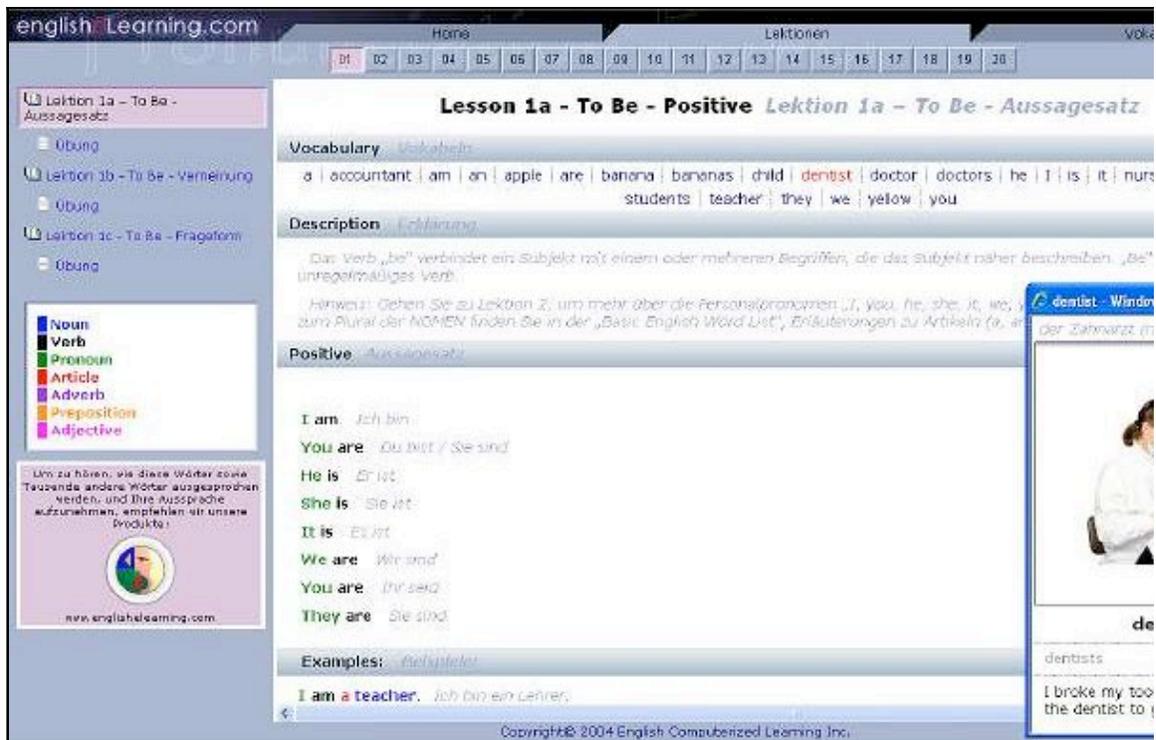
Figure 2. Example of a lesson in the German version

As demonstrated in Figure 2 (German version), all instructions, along with translations of the examples and the vocabulary words, appear in the respective native language. In order to view the non-Western versions of the product (with the exception of Vietnamese), the computer must be equipped with the appropriate language reader and fonts.
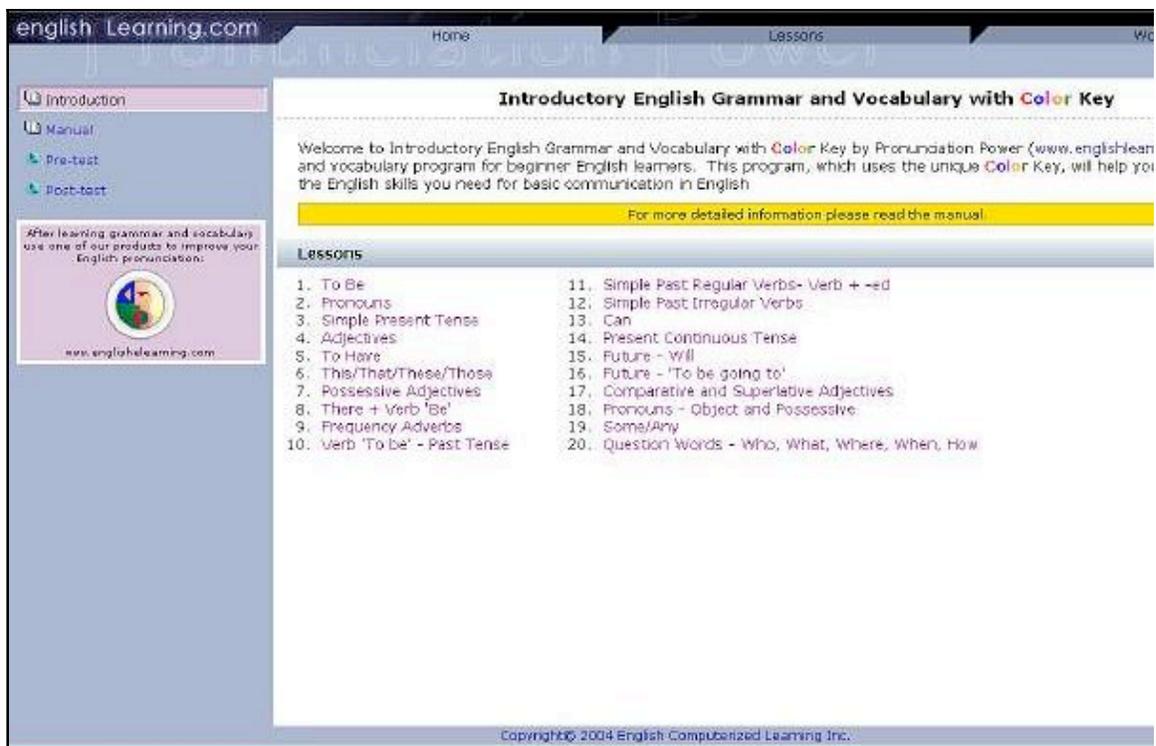
Figure 3. Main menu

The main menu (Figure 3) is easy to navigate. Students can begin by testing their skills with a Pre-test, reviewing the manual or simply by clicking on a lesson. The pre- and post-tests are available on the publisher's website (also published in the same 10 languages). The manual explains the program and provides some suggestions on how the software should be used (beginning with the pre-test, following the lessons and completing the exercises in each unit, and ending the program by testing the acquired knowledge with the post-test). On this page, the developers also list 22 words, which appear in the program but have not been included in the dictionary. The manual also presents several grammatical topics, which are not taught in the program because of their advanced nature (such as count-/non-count nouns, articles, and irregular verbs, to name a few). Each of these topics is presented with a short definition and simple examples.

From the main menu, the learner can also access any of the lessons listed by topics, or move to the page lessons, or access the word list. It is easy to return to the main page, the lessons page, or access the Word List from any point within the program.

Introductory English Grammar and Vocabulary with Color Key contains 20 grammatical units, 695 vocabulary words, 577 pictures and 41 exercises (total of 235 exercise items).

Description and Evaluation

Pre-/Post-tests

Clicking on either the pre- or post-test links the user to the publisher's website, where the tests can be accessed. Each test consists of a total of 46 items taken from the exercises in the program's units (items in the pre-test do not repeat in the post-test). Each test consists of 42 multiple-choice questions and 4 multiple-choice questions with pictures, intended to help the test-taker choose the correct answer (see Figure 4). All words in the tests appear in the assigned part of speech color; however, if learners do take the pre-test before using the program, this color-coding would not mean much to them, and may even be distracting.

Figure 4. Example items in the pre-test

After completing the relevant test the learners receive their score in a pop-up window, for example, "you got 11 out of 46 correct." The computer marks answers by putting a green check mark by correct items and a red "x" by incorrect items. It is not clear, however, what the score exactly means. It may be more useful for the test-takers if they were given an estimated level of competency based on their score along with a short explanation of why an answer is incorrect. Students might also benefit if, after completing the test, the program pointed them to specific exercises and instructions in the module that would help them with the missed items in the test.

The learners are given only one option at the end of the pre- and post-tests referring them back to the product description on the publisher's website. It might be beneficial for the test-takers to be able to e-mail the test results to themselves or their teacher

(if the program is used as supplementary material for a class), or at least save and/or print them out for further reference or remediation.

Lessons and Exercises

Introductory English Grammar and Vocabulary with Color Key presents 20 units, each of which focuses on a basic grammatical issue appropriate for beginning learners of English. Units are chosen from the main menu (Figure 3) where the topic of each lesson is listed, or simply by entering the "Lessons" page. From the "Lessons" page, all the units can be accessed by number at the top of the page.

Figure 5. Lesson 3a: Simple present tense

Each unit (Figure 5) begins with a list of the vocabulary used in that particular section. When a learner clicks on a word in the vocabulary bank, a pop-up menu opens with the word's properties, a short definition and an image, if relevant (see the pop-up menu on the right-hand-side on Figure 5).

Units are divided into shorter sections to simplify the instructions and help focus on the grammatical issue at hand. For example, Figure 5 shows Lesson 3a, which focuses on simple present tense in positive sentences. The following sections (listed on the left-hand-side of the screen) discuss simple present tense in negative sentences and questions in simple present tense. Each lesson provides a short definition of the grammatical issue followed by the "formula" of the structure and some examples for practice. If users are not using the program with instructions in their native language, the definitions might seem somewhat complicated, given that the target audience is at the beginner level. Despite the fact that the example structures and

sample exercises demonstrate the grammatical issue, it would be difficult for the target audience to fully comprehend the complexity of the linguistic form and its implementation without supplementary instruction and opportunities to practice it by engaging in authentic social interaction.
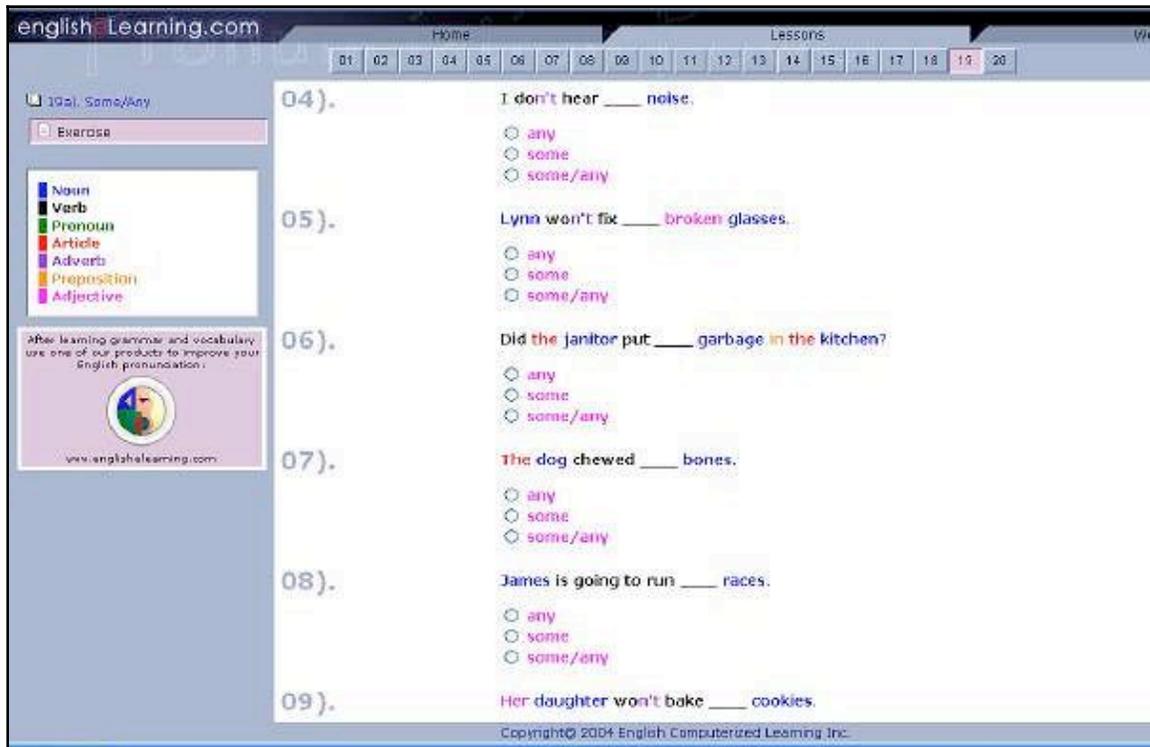

Figure 6. Lesson 19a multiple-choice exercises

Each word in the sentences appears in the color designated for the part of speech it represents. Students can refer to the legend listed on the left side of the screen which specifies what color pertains to what part of speech (see Figure 6). Researchers have found that acquiring linguistic input increases if learners' attention is directed to linguistic features by visually marking or enhancing grammatical forms, for instance, using different colors (Chapelle, 2003; Jamieson, Chapelle, & Preiss, 2004). Applying this principle, the reasoning would seem to be that students using *Introductory English Grammar and Vocabulary with Color Key*, consciously or sub-consciously, would begin to associate color with word order, which should ultimately help them remember these grammatical forms. For instance, students would remember that green (pronoun) comes before black (verb) in positive declarative sentences; therefore, following the example in Figure 5, learners would know that the sentence "Walk I" is incorrect; (green) "I walk" (black) is the correct way to express this action.

It is important to point out that there are no direct references to the definitions of the parts of speech that are color-coded (some of them are defined in the manual and some in separate lessons). It would be of value if students were provided with quick

links to the meaning of these grammatical concepts so that they would have a better understanding of the highlighted forms; otherwise, it might be difficult for the learners to accurately use these forms once they begin to create linguistic output on their own.
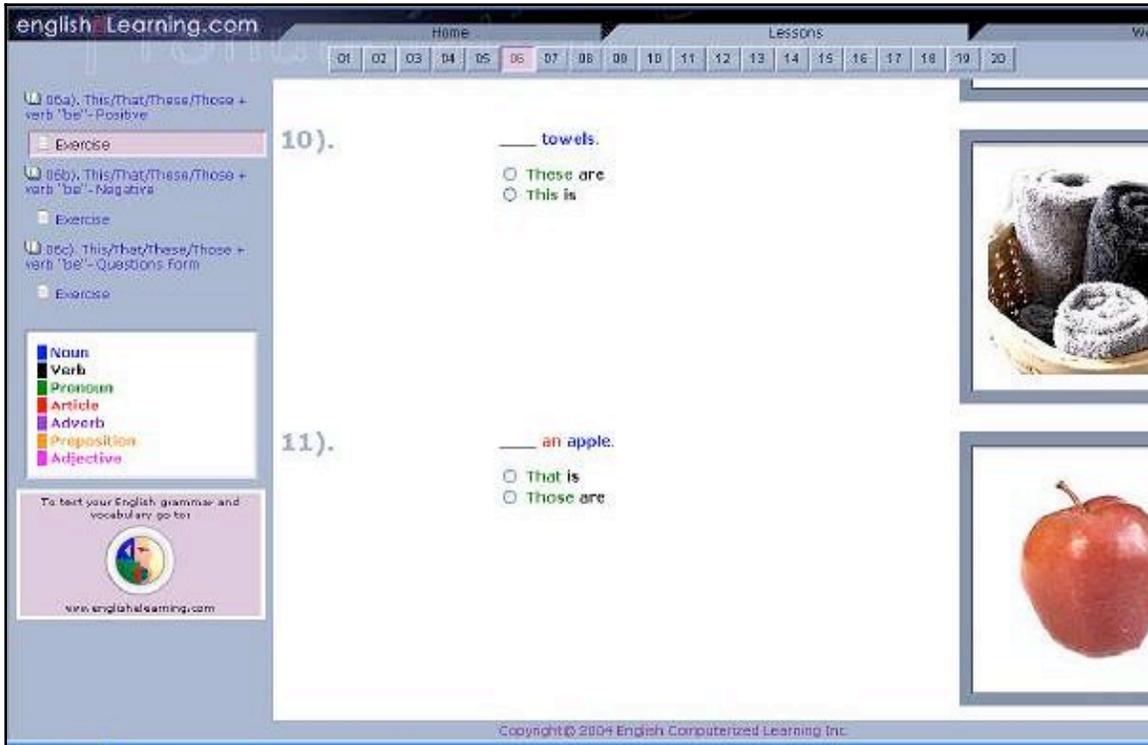

Figure 7. Example exercise: Items with pictures

Most sections in a lesson are followed by an exercise which allows users to practice the demonstrated grammatical pattern (there are, however, some lessons with no exercises, such as pronouns). The numbers of items in the exercises vary from 10 to 30. All exercises in this program are multiple-choice with two to four given choices (see Figure 6). Some of the exercises, while still multiple-choice, use pictures as prompts to help the learners choose the correct answer (see Figure 7). Both of these types of tasks (with or without pictures) resemble drill exercises. Although drill tasks have their value in language acquisition particularly in remediation, rehearsing, and reinforcing a grammatical issue, it is believed that they alone do not allow for engaging in authentic social interaction, which is a vary important factor in language learning (Egbert, 1999). Thus, it would be useful if the practice activities engage learners in more interactive tasks, which would trigger learners to spontaneously use the acquired structures. For instance, in order to practice the difference between *this* vs. *that* and *these* vs. *those* (which was the focus of the lesson for the exercise on Figure 7), a computer-mediated task could prompt a group activity in which the learners engage in negotiating the relative distance of objects. This way students would not only practice the grammatical issue but would also be more likely to engage in negotion of meaning and/or form which is what often happens in authentic conversations.

Other types of tasks could also be incorporated. For example, users could be prompted to write short e-mails on topics that would trigger the use of a particular grammatical form (for example, writing a letter to the boss describing an incident, which would focus on past tenses), or surf the net for a specific purpose (for instance, looking for airplane tickets). Both of these are authentic tasks that students may engage in in the real world and would also allow them to practice different language skills.

Vocabulary

Throughout the program, students have the opportunity to access the word list and look up any vocabulary they need help with. From the menu on the left side (see Figure 8), students can choose to browse through all the vocabulary found in the program, look up words by part of speech (noun, verb, etc.), or by topic (body parts, fruit, etc.).

Figure 8. Word list page

Once learners have clicked on a search method, they can find the word they are looking for in the middle section of the page. When they have clicked on a particular word, they can view its properties in the right side of the screen, including its definition or a sentence in which the word has been used, an image to help better understand the vocabulary's meaning, and any other information that might pertain to that particular word (plural forms of nouns or all of a verb's forms). This feature is particularly helpful to learners, as the use of images with vocabulary learning is considered beneficial in creating multiple connections to the new word (Healey, 1999).

It seems, however, that there should be exercises that allow specifically for vocabulary practice, since vocabulary is one of the main focuses of *Introductory English Grammar and Vocabulary with Color Key*. It would be appropriate to incorporate sound and video for this purpose, which could engage learners in activities using the new words.

Recommendations

Useful as it is now, a number of features would enhance the usefulness of this program.

- As Jamieson et al. point out, the use of color alone to enhance linguistic input is questionable considering that many people are color-blind (Jamieson et al., 2004). Therefore, it would be beneficial if the developers adapted other techniques in addition to color (i.e., different font sizes, highlighting, sound, etc.).
- Varying the exercises and implementing activities which allow for engaging in authentic interactions would enhance the learners' acquisition of the grammatical forms.
- It may be useful if the grammatical concepts within the descriptions were also linked to their definitions for quick reference. The color-coded parts of speech should also be given definitions. Students should be able to click on a word in the legend menu which would point them to the respective definition.
- Learners may profit from being provided with more feedback on the incorrect items in the exercises. Opportunities to correct linguistic feedback (such as receiving feedback on production) have been found valuable for producing comprehensible output (Chapelle, 2003).
- The program does not keep any records of student performance. Learners should be able to save, e-mail, and/or print results from the tests and exercises. This would allow students to keep track of their progress and also focus on the specific linguistic forms they need more practice with.

Conclusion

Introductory English Grammar and Vocabulary with Color Key allows students to learn some basic grammatical structures and vocabulary while directing their attention to parts of speech via the enhancement of color. It would be difficult, however, to use this program for self-study without native language support, a basic knowledge of English, or additional help. Therefore, this tool may be more suited for use as supplementary material for classroom instruction since the focus here is solely grammar and vocabulary, and there are no opportunities for students to engage in authentic social interactions using this program alone. If this software were to be used as a supplementary tool, it would be useful if the instructors had access to the results of the exercises, not only to keep track of learners' progress but also to provide feedback on students' performance. In addition to focusing the learners' attention on linguistic forms through the enhancement of color, *Introductory English Grammar and Vocabulary with Color Key* allows for reinforcement and remediation of grammatical issues with its drill-practice activities.

References

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About the Author

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