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BrainPop ESL

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| Title | BrainPOP ESL (http://www.brainpopesl.com/) |
| Contact Information | http://www.brainpopesl.com/ Tel. +1 (212) 689-9923 Fax +1 (212) 897-3700 Email: info@brainpop.com Address: 71 W 23rd St., 17th Fl. New York, NY 10010 |
| Type of product | Website for learners of English |
| Platform | Web |
| Minimum hardware requirement | A computer with Internet access |
| Supplementary software requirement | Up-to-date version of Adobe Flash |
| Price | Price varies by subscription plan |

Introduction

Many Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) programs are not designed with the special needs and interests of young learners in mind. However, the website being reviewed here, BrainPOP ESL, is designed with those needs and interests in mind. This website uses interesting characters, games, and movies to teach young learners about reading, writing, listening, speaking, vocabulary, and grammar in English.

Description of the Website

BrainPOP ESL is a website which aims to teach English as a Second Language (ESL) to young learners. According to the developers of this website, it is versatile enough to be used for young learners all around the world. It is also purports to offer a fun and exciting learning environment for students of all cultural and language backgrounds to learn in. This website can be used either as part of a class or individually at home.

Once logged on, learners will see the main page of BrainPOP ESL (see Figure1). First, learners click level 1 or 2 according to their English proficiency. Both level 1 and level 2 contain 6 units. Each unit includes 5 lessons. In order to start a lesson, learners click the play button to begin a flash animation. The flash animation is always a conversation between Ben and his robot friend, Moby. They are the two main characters in this program and appear in every unit.



Figure 1. BrainPOP ESL main page

The conversations between Ben and Moby which start each lesson are composed of three sections. In the first part, Ben and Moby introduce an anecdote, using associated vocabulary and grammar. The next section, **Words to Know**, explains new vocabulary from each lesson. In the last part, **Facts to Know, Ben and Moby** present the grammar points introduced in their conversation. After watching the movie, learners start working on the 8 features that encourage further study and review each lesson (see the green buttons at the bottom of Figure 2).




Figure 2. *Unit menu page*

The first feature, *Know More*, presents the grammar points of each lesson (see Figure 3). Students can read an explanation of the grammatical rules and examples of the grammar point. Grammar rules are explained explicitly and deductively. Short example sentences that use the grammatical structure are provided.

Brain POP **LEVEL 1** **2-4 I Love The Poppers!** **Know More!** **!**

Stative Verbs



Some verbs don't take the **-ing** form even when something is happening now. These verbs often describe how we feel (like **love**, **like**, **want**), how we think (like **know**) and our senses (like **smell**).

For example: I **see** you now.
 You **like** Ben and Moby.
 I **love** you.
 The flowers **smell** good.
 We **hear** the music.
 You **know** Ben and Moby.
 They **want** ice cream now!

Reading

When the letter **e** comes at the end of the word, after a vowel and a consonant, the vowel sounds like its name (see [Know More U2L3](#)).

For example: **o** - home (sounds like its name **o**)
i - like (sounds like its name **i**)

The letter combination **ee** sounds like the name of the letter **e**. The letter combination **ea** usually sounds like the name of the letter **e**.

For example: see (sounds like **s** + the name of the letter **e**)
 hear

Figure 3. *An example Know More! page*

The *Words, Words, Words!* section defines vocabulary and provides users with flashcard-based vocabulary practice. When the cursor touches the card, a learner can listen to the pronunciation of the word. If the learner clicks the card, it flips over and shows a picture that illustrates the word.

The *Read It!* section provides expository reading passages (see Figure 4). The learner is supposed to read the passage and answer the reading comprehension exercises when finished. The comprehension questions are asked one at a time and the learner cannot proceed to the next question until answering each question correctly.

LOG OUT

Brain POP LEVEL 2
L1 Take Up a Hobby! **Read It!**

The English Language Print

A living language is a language that has old and new words. Sometimes we make new words and sometimes we bring in old words for new things. English has many hundreds of words. Did you know that no other language has so many? How did that happen?

The English you are learning today is about six hundred years old. Six hundred years ago, there were many other languages like Chinese, French, Greek and Russian. So when people needed words for their new language, English, they just took words from the other languages. They took the words "astronomy," "geography" and "phone" from Old Greek. They took "globe" and "information" from another very old language, Latin. They took "postcard" from French and "chocolate" from Spanish.

A living language _____.

A is a language that has old and new words
B is a language with no new words
C is Greek or Latin
D has a hundred words

Figure 4. An example *Read It!* section

Write It! offers instruction and writing exercises including the letters and words introduced in *Read It!* For low proficiency level learners, *Write It!* offers English alphabet writing practice. The learners can print the page and practice writing the letters in the English alphabet. At higher proficiency levels, learners are asked to write a paragraph using the given instructions. For instance, in level 2, a writing prompt is offered, and the learner is supposed to write structured paragraphs based on the instructions and prompt (see Figure 5).



Figure 6. An example *Play It!* game

Warm Up! (see Figure 7) contains easy exercises where students can practice and review what they have learned from a lesson.



Figure 7. An example *Warm Up!* page

Finally, learners can take a lesson review quiz in *You Can Do It* (see figure 8), which is very similar in format to the *Warm Up!* activities.

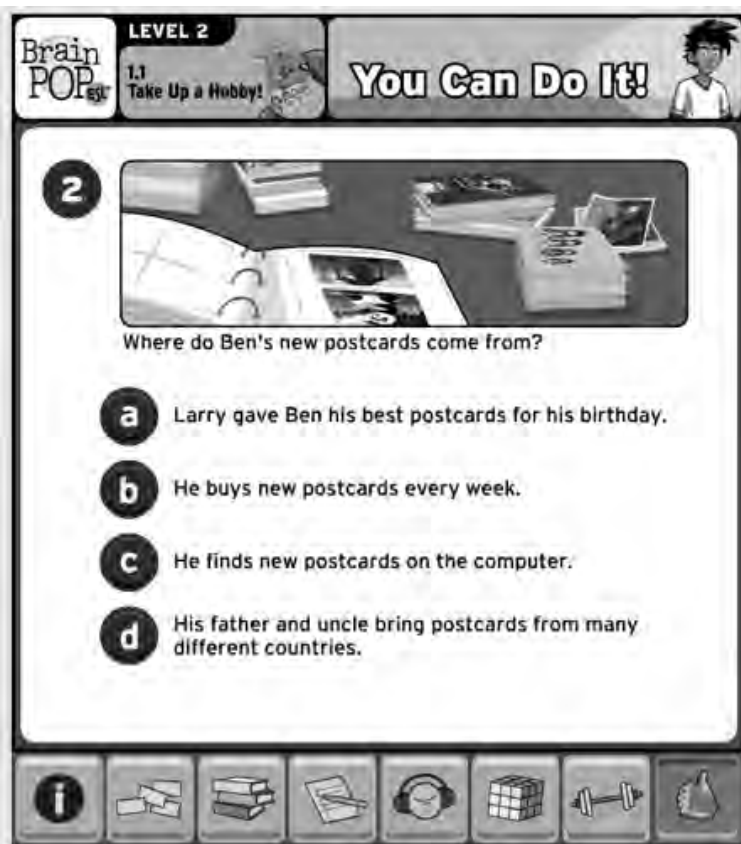


Figure 8. An example *You Can Do It!* page

Program Evaluation

BrainPOP ESL is designed to teach reading, writing, listening, speaking, vocabulary, and grammar to ESL children. Therefore, the interface of this website has been designed in a way that is quite easy to navigate. Users can move from page to page by clicking a button. Also, the developers of this website used vivid colors and animated characters, which children tend to like and focus on. In each lesson, English grammar and vocabulary are taught through interesting movies, which activate the learner's background knowledge. The characters are good models of communicative competence because they present appropriate use of language in given settings. Also, they showcase interpersonal relationships which demonstrate realistic example of real world situations the students may encounter.

Each unit is divided by level and includes a variety of lessons to help students learn English vocabulary, expressions, grammar points, and proper pronunciation. Quizzes and activities are also provided to reinforce and check comprehension and listening

skills. In addition, the website has a choice of games in each lesson. Therefore, users can play the games without getting tired of or used to the same old style of play.

BrainPOP ESL also offers useful tools for teachers. It provides well-made and ready to use lesson plans, word lists, and student progress trackers. Teachers can print these out, bring them to the class, and then use them with students. Also, teachers can turn off the subtitles while learners watch the movie to provide learners with more of a challenge.

In spite of these strengths, BrainPOP ESL also has several shortcomings. First, it does not offer a placement test or criteria for assigning learners to different levels in the website. Teachers have to figure out their learners' proficiency level using information from the website.

Next, in terms of teaching productive skills, such as speaking and writing, BrainPOP ESL does not provide learners with any kind of feedback. When learners complete the writing activities and the speaking activities, they are not given any feedback. Therefore, learners need to have a teacher or parents check on their work even though the developers of this website advertise that learners can study individually.

Another weakness of the website is their method of explaining grammar. As Azar (2007) states, grammar should be described inductively as well as deductively to give students a chance to figure grammar patterns out for themselves, in addition to giving explicit information about grammar. However, the grammar lessons in BrainPOP ESL explain English grammar only deductively. This website requires a teachers' help to address how to use the grammar rules with examples. In addition, the topics of the each reading passages in *Read It!* is not always associated with each lesson. For example, the topic of one unit is taking up a hobby, but the topic of the reading passage and the comprehension questions are about the English language (see Figure 4) which does not have any apparent connection with the original topic of the unit.

Summary

In sum, despite a few drawbacks, BrainPOP ESL is fun and uses real-life content to teach young ESL learners. Every lesson is taught in situations that learners could conceivably encounter on an everyday basis. This adds context for learners and helps students learn idioms and other cultural expressions. Finally, the website is easy for young learners to use, and good for learners with various learning styles.

References

Azar, B. (2007). Grammar-based teaching: A practitioner's perspective. *TESL-EJ*, 11(2), 1-12. Available: <http://tesl-ej.org/ej42/a1.html>.

About the Reviewer

Yunjin Kim has an M.A. in TESL and applied linguistics from Northern Arizona University where she teaches a reading and writing class. She is interested in syntax, corpus linguistics, and computer assisted language learning.

yk45@nau.edu

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