

Gramster II

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Title	Gramster II
Publisher	EduLang
Contact Information	EDULANG.COM Ltd – Companies Registry 360987 – Unit 1701, 17th Floor, The Sun's Group Centre, N° 200 Gloucester Road, Wanchai, Hong Kong H.K.
Type of product	Online grammar application
Platform	Internet
Price	"Pay What You Want" (one-year access)

Introduction

Grammar is often considered one of the more difficult aspects of a foreign language to master. English Language Learners (ELLs) learn new grammar rules every day, but they sometimes struggle to apply those rules automatically when they speak or write in English. Extra practice is needed in order for learners to be able to carry out their communication effectively. The Information Age has provided ELLs with a wide variety of technological aids to facilitate their learning processes and provide them with extra self-practice. However, it is important to determine whether or not those technological resources are genuinely effective for addressing new literacies that address users' knowledge, context, engagement, use of critical thinking, interaction, and integration of different language skills. The purpose of this paper is to introduce Gramster II, an online application intended to help ELLs improve their grammar, and evaluate it in terms of the how it addresses the learning of new literacies.

General Description

Gramster II is an internet-based application that aims to help ELLs grammar development by providing students with practice exercises and highlighting primary grammatical points. After accessing Gramster II through <http://www.edulang.com/en/>, the user is provided with a login ID and password at no cost. The user then determines what he/she wants to pay, and half of that amount is donated to the charity organization Room to Read. The user may then use Gramster II for the next 12 months. Gramster II consists of five levels of English proficiency as shown in Table 1. The program focuses on 35 grammar points as well as provides practice exercises depending on the user's level of language proficiency. Table 1 lists the grammar topics covered under each level.

Table 1. *Gramster II content for varying English proficiency levels*

Level 1: Beginner <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Simple sentences • Yes / No questions • This, that, these and those • Singular, plural and group nouns • Direct and Indirect objects • Adverbs and adverbs of frequency • My and mine • Test yourself on Level 1 (8 tests) 	Level 2: False Beginner <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Verbs + -ing • Quantities – much, many, lot of, few, little • Auxiliary verbs – be, do and have • Quantities – most, some, all, no, none, any • Adverbs for lengths of time • Talking about groups – every, each, both, either, neither • Link verbs • Test yourself on Level 2 (8 tests) 	Level 3: Intermediate <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Verbs with two objects • Comparing using ‘as...as’, like, the way, the same as • ‘To’ infinitives • Too, enough, too much, too many • Nouns + prepositions – fixed expressions • Talking about numbers – decimals, fractions and percents • So, such a, rather, awfully, extremely, pretty • Test yourself on Level 3 (8 tests)
Level 4: Advanced <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clauses to describe times • Adjectives and prepositions • Conditional sentences without if • Talking about purposes • Reciprocal pronouns and their verbs • Linking words • Prepositions of time • Test yourself on Level 4 (8 tests) 	Level 5: Proficiency <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Past events which did not happen • Impersonal subjects – it and there • Inversion • What clauses • Subjunctive • As if, as though, imagine and suppose • Semi-modal verbs • Test yourself on Level 5 (8 tests) 	

When a user clicks on a grammar topic, the application presents choices of ten sub-sections including a reading passage with pre and post reading tasks, a glossary list, and practice exercises such as multiple choice, drag and drop, gap filling, and word selection. At the end of each level, there is a test to assess the user’s progress. Samples of those sub-sections are displayed in Figures 1-3.

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This, that, these and those

Before you read.

Buying a mobile phone.

Did you understand the conversation?

The grammar rules.

Did you understand the grammar rules?

Missing phrases.

Are these sentences correct?

What words are missing?

Words connected to mobile phones.

Glossary.

Before you read.

You are going to read a conversation in a mobile phone shop. These phrases are in the conversation. Drag the missing word into each phrase.

have in let's please that those

_____ (?) go in.

I like _____ (?) new phones.

Oh dear, yes _____ (?) is very expensive.

I like _____ (?) blue one.

Good I _____ (?) 70 Euros to spend.

This phone is _____ (?) the sale.

Great. I will have it _____ (?)

have in let's please that those

OK

Figure 1. 'Before you read' beginner drag and drop task

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Quantities - much, many, lot of, few, little

Before you read.

Gang cheat at a casino to win millions!

Did you understand the text?

The grammar rules.

Did you understand the grammar rules?

Missing words for quantities.

Choose the correct quantity word.

They don't like living in London!

Words connected to places we go in our free time.

Glossary.

Gang cheat at a casino to win millions!

Read this text about a gang who won a lot of money at a casino unfairly. Complete the next exercise.

Gang use remote-controlled ball to win millions from a casino.

By Steve Mabsion in London.

Many people dream of winning millions of pounds in a casino. Few are successful. Tonight there are a lot of policemen in London who are looking for two men and a woman who won £2 million pounds in a casino. They won it at roulette, but not fairly.

The casino owners say that the gang used a roulette ball which was remote-controlled. They used an electromagnet to control where the ball stopped. It didn't take much time for them to win the £2 million.

At some point during the evening the thieves changed the balls used in the game. Police know little about how they did this. There are a few clues on the casino's CCTV cameras which police are studying.

The gang probably used this trick many times before. There have been a lot of very big wins in London casinos recently. The police know little about who these people are.

There is little chance of them being successful again. All casino owners are now aware of the trick and a few of them are installing machines to stop this. Few people manage to beat the casinos but this gang did.

NEXT

Figure 2. False Beginner reading passage

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Comparing using, 'as... as', like, the way, the same as

Before you read.

British men changing shape!

Did you understand the text?

The grammar rules.

Did you understand the grammar rules?

What is the missing adjective?

Way, like, or same?

What do children think about marriage?

Words for parts of our body.

Glossary.

Did you understand the text?

Read these sentences about the article on the changing shape of British men and decide if they are true or false.

British men look like they did in the 1960's.
True(?) False(?)

British men are as big as they were 45 years ago.
True(?) False(?)

In 1969 tummies were as large as hips.
True(?) False(?)

British men are as happy as they could be with their shape.
True(?) False(?)

Dr Karl Murray has worked harder than anyone else on the shape of the body.
True(?) False(?)

Men are now less fit than their fathers.
True(?) False(?)

Men exercise less than 10 years ago.
True(?) False(?)

One of the reasons that men's bodies are not like they were 10 years ago is different eating habits.
True(?) False(?)

OK

Figure 3. *Intermediate post reading task*

Immediately following the subsections, a grammar rule (see Figure 4) is displayed.

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Adjectives and prepositions

Before you read.

The discovery of a new species of very small monkey.

Did you understand the article?

The grammar rules.

Did you understand the grammar rules?

Opposite adjectives.

Missing adjectives.

Woman loses half her weight!

Words connected to Africa.

Glossary.

The grammar rules.

Here are the grammar rules for fixed phrases made from adjectives followed by prepositions.

Adjectives and prepositions

1. About adjectives and fixed prepositions
There are many adjectives which are often followed by the same preposition. These prepositions add the necessary information to complete the meaning of the sentence. For example, *I am angry*. is a correct sentence but if you want to express who or what has made you angry you need to use the prepositions *with* for people or *about* for situations. So, *I am angry with Helen* or *I am angry about this terrible news*. Therefore, many adjectives are followed by a fixed preposition and a noun phrase which are essential to complete their meaning.

Adjectives and prepositions always follow link verbs such as *to be*, *seem*, *appear*. They are then followed by a noun phrase which is needed to complete the meaning of the sentence.

2. Adjectives which must be followed by a preposition
These are all adjectives which **MUST** be followed by their preposition. These are fixed pairs of words. An example is *averse*. We cannot say *I am averse*. We must use a preposition after *averse* and this preposition is always *to*. So, *I am averse to watching television*. Here are other examples of adjectives used this way:
Jackie is prone to getting colds.
I am very fond of chocolate ice cream.
All restaurants are subject to inspection by Health and Safety officials.

3. Adjectives which can be followed by a preposition and can also be used without any preposition
Adjectives which can be followed by "to"
Here are some **adjectives** which can be followed by the preposition **to**. They can also be used without a preposition if no extra information is being provided. If you are unsure of the meaning of these adjectives please look in the glossary.
James is devoted to his wife.
I can't eat nuts as I am allergic to them.

Figure 4. *Advanced grammar rule*

Following each grammar rule, there is a 'Did you understand the grammar rules?' task (shown in Figure 5) in which the user is given the chance to review the grammar point

by completing a practice exercise that asks direct questions about the construction of the rule.

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Semi-modal verbs

Before you read.

Avoid problems: things you need to do when using e-mail.

Did you understand the text?

The grammar rules.

Did you understand the grammar rules?

Using semi-modals.

Using the semi-modals correctly.

Advice for job interviews.

Words for job interviews.

Glossary.

Did you understand the grammar rules?

Read these sentences about the use and the form of the semi-modals. Drag the correct word into the correct space.

Word Bank: certain, correct, necessary, need to, negative, not, obligations, perfect, recommendation, to be

Had better is followed by the infinitive without *to* and the negative form is *had better* _____.?

Ought to + infinitive is used to describe what is the right or _____? course of action.

To express that you are _____? something has happened in the past you can use *bound to* + perfect infinitive.

Didn't need to and *needn't* can both be used to say that an action which took place in the past was not _____?.

To talk about _____? in the past we can use *had to* + infinitive.

To state what were correct actions in the past, you can use *ought to* and the _____? infinitive.

If you want to make a _____? for what is to happen you can use *had better* + infinitive.

The _____? form of *ought to* is *ought not to*.

Figure 5. *'Did you understand the grammar rules?' task*

If a student needs assistance with an activity, he/she may click on the question mark box and be provided with a hint to help complete the activity. After providing an answer, the user receives instant feedback at the bottom of the page.

Evaluation

The criteria used to conduct this evaluation of Gramster II are part of the pedagogical framework provided by Jonassen (1999). This framework "help[s] analyze the extent to which computer applications are being used as mindtools to generate knowledge and promote critical thinking" (Cummins, Brown & Sayers, 2007, p. 111). Jonassen (1999) specifically identified three key dimensions to evaluate technological tools: (a) engagement, (b) generativity of knowledge and critical thinking, and (c) control (in Cummins, Brown & Sayers, 2007, p. 111). In addition to these dimensions of new literacies, the use of context, the integration of different language skills, and interaction are taken into consideration in this tool's evaluation.

Engagement and Generativity

To some extent, Gramster II promotes generativity of knowledge and critical thinking, which enhance engaged learning. The adopted approach to practice grammar is the inductive approach, which "starts with some examples from which a rule is inferred" (Thornbury, 2000, p. 29). The 'before you read' task (see Figure 1) draws on the user's prior knowledge. Instead of starting by introducing the grammar point, Gramster II gives the users the chance to use critical thinking skills and draw on prior knowledge to infer the application of a specific rule. Before the user reaches the grammar point, he/she goes through a reading passage in addition to pre-reading and post-reading

tasks connected to the reading (as seen in Figures 1, 2, and 3). Although the software offers different tasks to practice each grammar point, the number of tasks is limited, i.e. there is only one exercise for every sub-section. The small number of tasks would do little to improve the user's level if they repeat the same exercise over and over again.

Control

Gramster II subsections are formatted the same under each grammar point, making the tasks easy to navigate. Also, the program permits the user to control the learning process by easily navigating through the different options. In other words, if the user is engaged in a certain task in which he/she could not remember a certain grammar point or understand a word, the user can go back to the grammar rule or look up a word in the dictionary and then return to the task, thereby allowing greater control over the learning experience.

Context

The examples in the grammar points are drawn from authentic discourse such as magazines, newspapers, surveys, reports, and quotes. This allows the user to see how a grammar rule is used in various daily-life contexts, and practice applications of appropriate use.

Integration of Different Language Skills

Another strength of Gramster II is the integration of different language skills that may increase the user's engagement and learning. In addition to enhancing reading by allowing practice applications of grammar in context, Gramster II also works on developing the user's vocabulary competence by providing tasks to practice vocabulary as connected to the theme of the topic. Also, the last section of each grammar point contains a glossary list with some of the encountered vocabulary words. Figures 6 and 7 show samples of a vocabulary practice exercise and a glossary list.

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Verbs with two objects

Before you read.

How many cigarettes do you need to smoke before you are addicted?

Did you understand the article?

The grammar rules.

Did you understand the grammar rules?

Which is the missing ditransitive verb?

One word too many.

Missing words in sentences with ditransitive verbs.

Words connected to smoking.

Glossary.

Words connected to smoking.

The article "How many cigarettes do you need to smoke before you are addicted?" described a study into smoking. Here are some definitions of more words connected to smoking. Drag the correct word into the space before each definition.

ash

ashtray

butt

cough

health

lighter

lights or lites

lung cancer

matches

tax

_____ (?) (n) - this is a small device which is made of plastic and used to light cigarettes.

_____ (?) (n) - a disease caused by smoking.

_____ (?) (n) - the place where we put finished cigarettes.

_____ (?) (n) - is what we destroy through smoking.

_____ (?) (n) - these are small wooden sticks which are sold in a small box and are used to light cigarettes.

_____ (?) (n) - the grey, powdery substance which is left after a cigarette has burnt.

_____ (?) (n) - money from the sale of cigarettes which goes to the government.

_____ (?) (v) - is the action and the sound caused by clearing the lungs.

Figure 6. Sample of vocabulary exercise

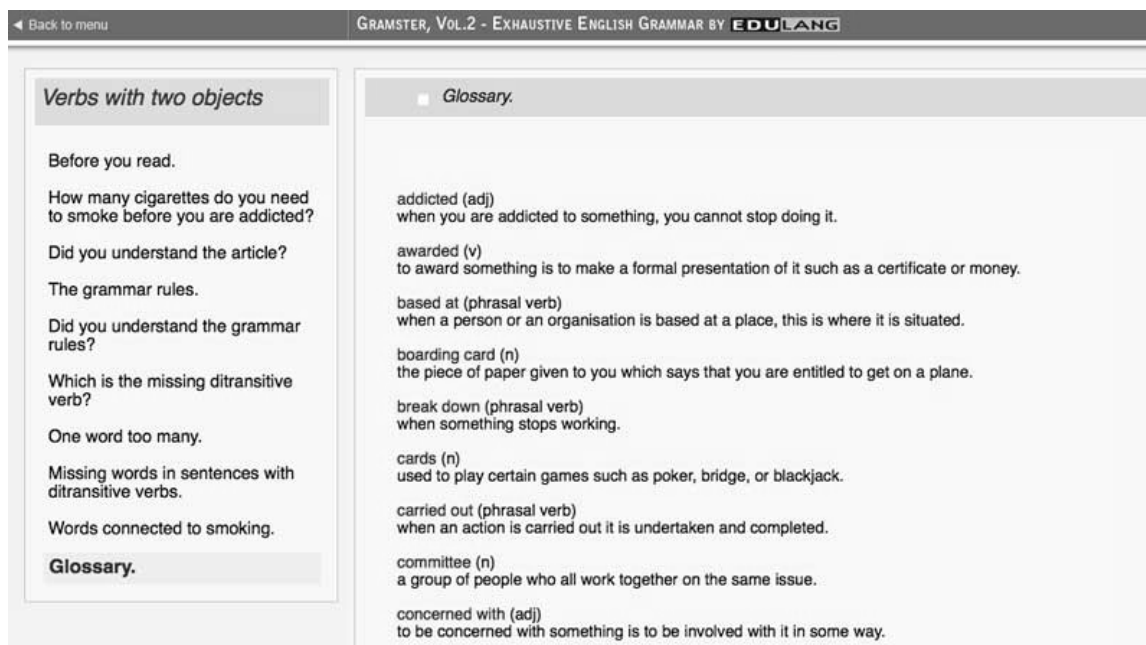


Figure 7. *Sample of glossary list*

Although Gramster II assists in developing grammatical competence, reading, vocabulary, there are not explicit tasks designed for writing improvement. An example of a potential task that could be included is one which has learners write a paragraph or an essay related to the theme of the topic to encourage users to apply the learned grammar points. In addition, having audio assistance available for the instruction, reading, and exercises would add additional aural comprehension activities to Gramster II. The user could practice listening and learn how words are pronounced in addition to the suprasegmentals of English such as intonation and stress. This would also help users in learning the correct pronunciation of verb-endings of regular forms of the past tense /t/, /d/, and /id/, and the third person endings in the present simple tense /s/ and /z/.

Interaction

Gramster 2 can be considered interactive in terms of user/computer interaction. After each response the user gives, immediate feedback pops up to tell the user whether his/her answer is correct or not. The program also provides different font colors for the chosen response, green indicating a correct answer and red indicating an incorrect answer, as shown in Figure 8. This makes it easier for the user to recognize his/her mistakes.

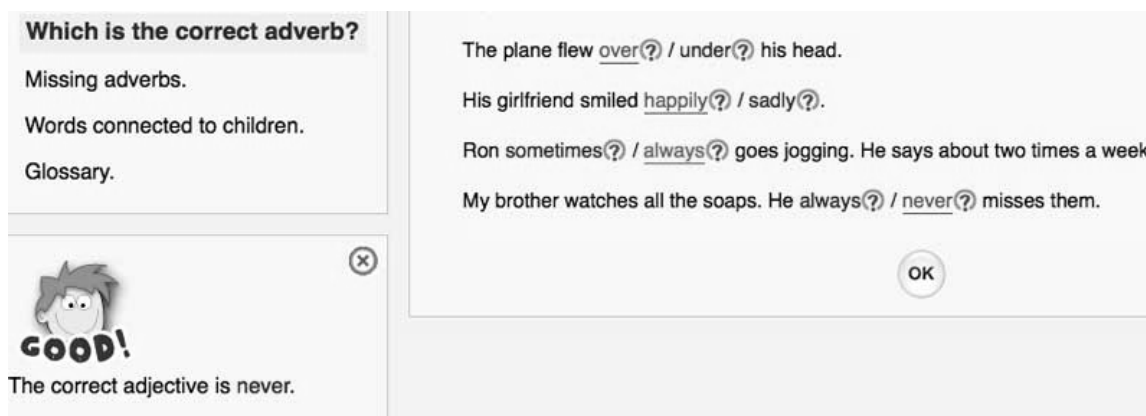


Figure 8. *Sample of feedback*

An additional interactive feature is provided in the help options provided by Gramster II. One help option is the question mark box which, when clicked, gives users a hint to find the correct response. Another help option is available in the dictionary feature of the program. If the user does not understand a certain word, he/she can right-click on the word and different definitions are given. An example is provided in Figure 9.

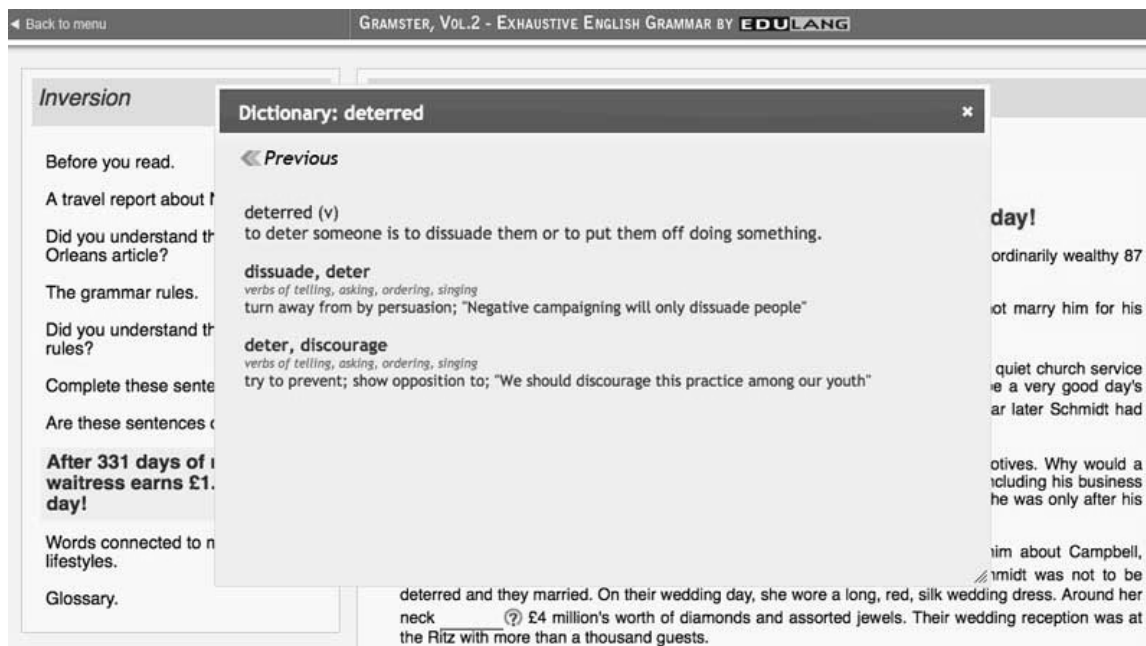


Figure 9. *Sample of dictionary definition*

Conclusion

Overall, Gramster II is a useful resource for practicing grammar in an interactive and authentic context. Grammar rules are explained in a clear and simple way. The program activities focus on the meaning of grammar points, but also attend to the grammatical form. In addition to grammar, Gramster II integrates other skills such as reading and vocabulary. However, there are still drawbacks to the program. Shortcomings of

Gramster II include: the limited content, which might make it less useable; a lack of explicit writing tasks to assist in applying grammar in context; lack of audio to improve the users' listening skills and pronunciation. Despite these shortcomings, Gramster II can be a useful tool for self-practice or supplementary material to practice grammar.

References

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