Pronunciation in English

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Title	Pronunciation in English
Level	High Beginning + and Intermediate +
Publisher	AmEnglish.com & ETS
Type of product	Online pronunciation teaching and practice
Minimum Hardware Requirements	Computer with Internet access and a microphone
Software Requirements	Adobe® Flash Player 9 or higher
Price	High Beginning + $39.50; Intermediate + $39.50 (for a 90-day subscription)

Introduction

Pronunciation in English (*PiE*) is an online program recommended by Educational Test Service (ETS) as a product of its *English Skills Series*. This series is intended to help prepare students for tests such as TOEFL, TOEIC, and IELTS. *PiE* was produced by AMEnglish.com on behalf of ETS and is used by many international companies and hundreds of universities (view full list at http://www.amenglishonline.com).

General Description

PiE addresses five areas of English pronunciation in six modules: (a) syllables, (b) word stress, (c) IPA symbols and individual sounds, (d) sentence stress, (e) intonation, and (f) rhythm. The first three of these modules are in the *High Beginning* course and the last three of them are in the *Intermediate* course. The *High Beginning* course is targeted for beginning to intermediate learners, whereas the *Intermediate* course is targeted for intermediate to advanced learners. *PiE* includes only a small module dedicated to segmental features that presents the IPA symbols and teaches merely seven individual sounds. Therefore, the program primarily focuses on suprasegmental features.
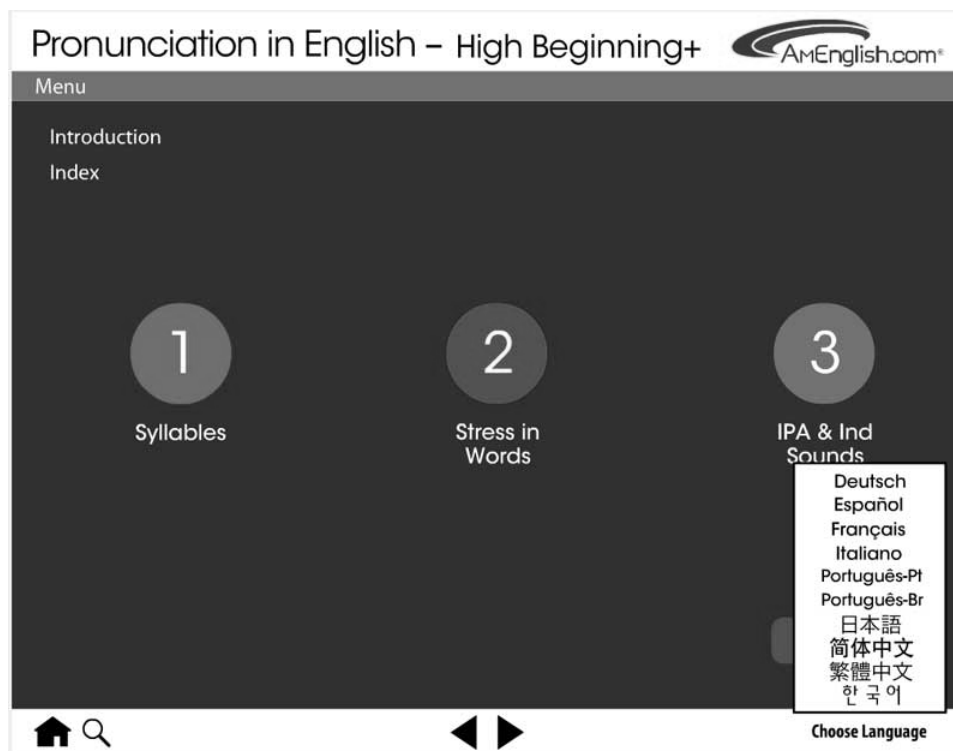
Content

The first module of the *High Beginning* course is devoted to syllables. It begins with an explanation of why syllables are sometimes problematic for non-native speakers and continues with teaching the identification of syllables. Exercises and application

activities encourage learners to practice counting the syllables in different types of words, such as past tense and words ending with "s." The second module focuses on teaching stress in words by explaining what stress is, its importance, and its features. Stress in nouns, adjectives, verbs, words with suffixes and reduced syllables are taught in detail by providing learners with abundant exercises and activities. The last module in this course introduces all IPA symbols and provides detailed explanations and exercises for seven sounds: /x/, /l/, /r/, /th/, /p/, /f/, /n/.

The first module in the *Intermediate* course is related to sentence stress and begins with teaching the basic stress patterns in sentences, primarily by explaining the difference between content and function words. Next, finding focus word(s) and emphasizing information in sentences are taught and some possible exceptions are noted. The second module is devoted to intonation skills—teaching intonation in yes/no questions, information questions, questions or statements providing alternatives and choices, sentences indicating the speaker's expectations, and presenting new versus old information. The last module teaches rhythm by reducing certain sounds and multi-word units such as "did you" and "want to," and by teaching how to reduce connecting words and "of" before vowels and consonants.

Design

The initial screen displays a user-friendly menu (Figure 1) where learners can choose their preferred language for video lecture captions and for exercise instructions. Learners can click on "index" on the top left corner to see the page contents of various units (Figure 2) or scroll over the name of the units on the main menu to see the general outline of the units (Figure 3).
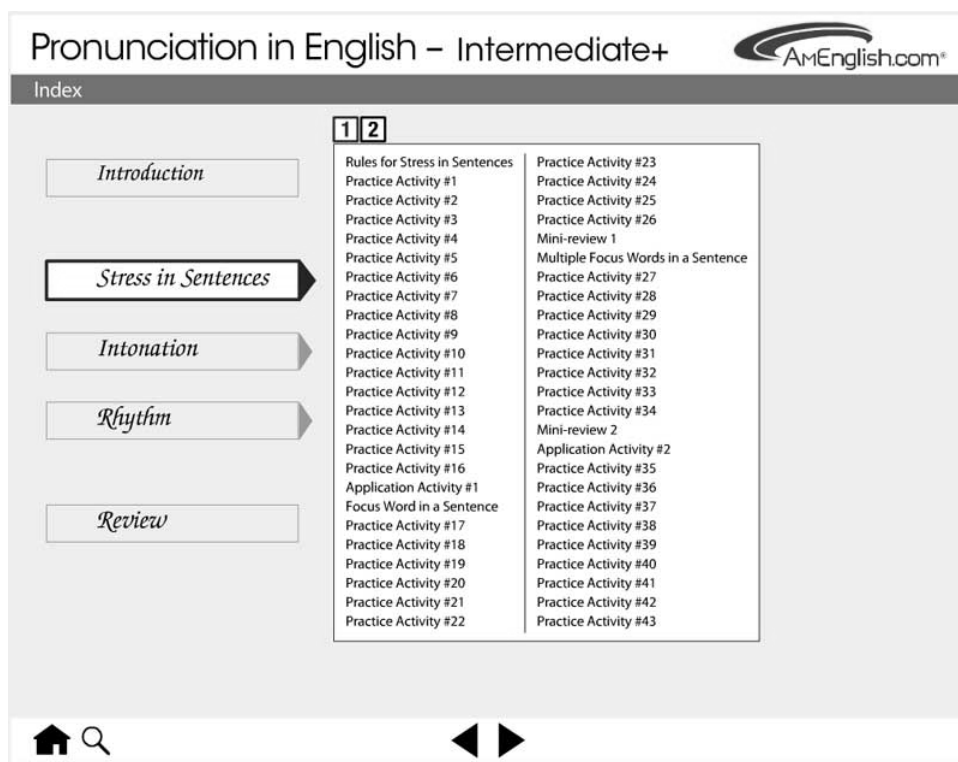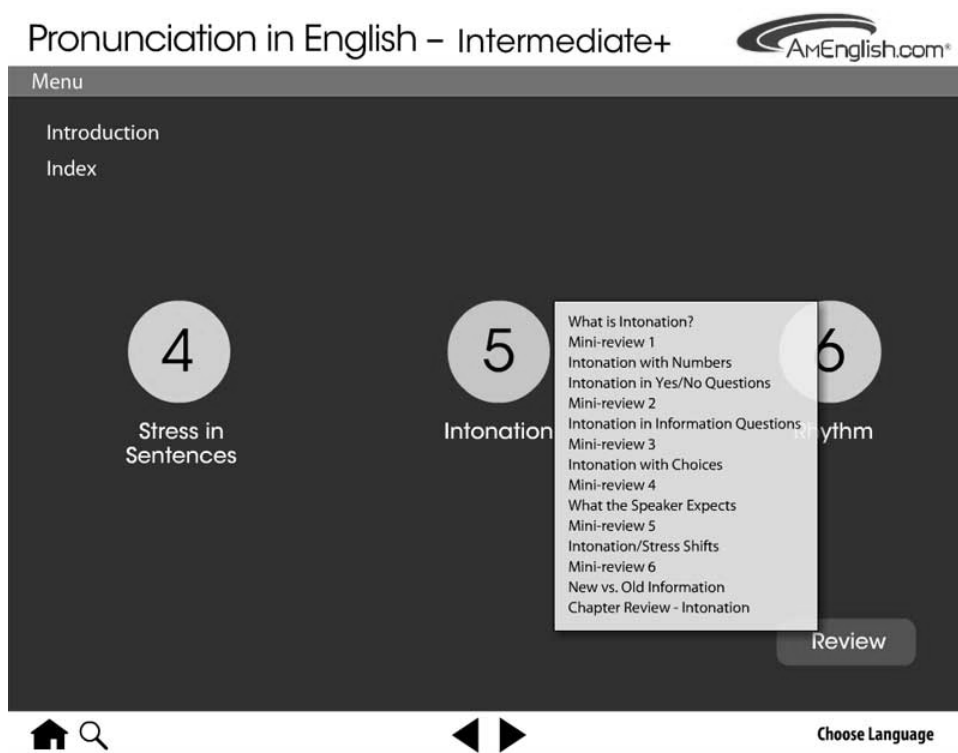

Figure 1. *Choosing a language*

Figure 2. *Index*

Figure 3. *Scroll-over index*

Clicking on the "home" icon on any screen brings learners to the table of contents. A magnifying glass icon is used to return to the index at any point. Learners can obtain

detailed information about the program and the use of each navigation tool by clicking on "introduction" in the top left corner (Figure 3).

Each program module begins with a video lecture (Figure 4) (accompanied by a transcript) that explains and demonstrates the feature being taught. All video lectures are provided by the same speaker and are followed by a number of practice exercises (Figure 5) and application activities (Figure 6) through which learners can improve their competency on a given feature.

Figure 4. *Video lecture on intonation*

Figure 5. *Practice Exercises and feedback in PiE*

Figure 6. *Application activity*

Additionally, learners are provided with a chance to test the skills they have learned in mini-reviews and reviews that are scored. For instance, in the chapter review of the "stress in words" module, learners are asked to identify stressed and unstressed syllables, as well as the number of syllables in the words (Figure 7).

Figure 7. *Review test*

PiE provides learners with immediate feedback only for receptive exercises through selected-response items or multiple-choice questions. It uses color-coding, underlining, different fonts and sizes, numerical scores, and different sounds to provide feedback, as shown in Figure 5. For productive practice, learners are encouraged to record their own pronunciation for each exercise. When they click on the "compare" button, learners are given the chance to sequentially play back their recordings to compare with the model speaker. Learners' own recordings are played after the recording of the model speaker. However, learners are not given any explicit feedback on their pronunciation, which means they must rely on their own perception as to how well they are doing.

Evaluation

Navigation in *PiE* is straightforward and very user-friendly; learners can quickly go to any section of the program and easily return to previous sections without losing their work. The program is satisfactory in that it meets learners' expectations in relation to authenticity. For example, some practice activities, such as giving telephone or

identification numbers to teach intonation skills, create a link between the exercises in the program and actual tasks outside the classroom. Another attractive feature of *PiE* is that it provides transcripts of the video lectures to enhance learners' understanding of the input. Enhanced input helps guide learners' attention to salient features of the L2, which may increase learners' success in SLA (Chapelle, 2003; Smith, 1993). Additionally, the focus of instruction in *PiE* is likely to improve learners' intelligibility in speaking, since recent research has shown that suprasegmentals play a more prominent role in intelligibility than segmentals (Derwing & Munro, 2005).

However, suprasegmentals' superior role in intelligibility should not lead developers to ignore segmentals, since, as Rogers and Dalby (1996) assert, segmental errors decrease the intelligibility of non-native speakers. *PiE* falls short of providing sufficient input and practice for segmentals, aiming only to teach seven sounds (/x/, /r/, /l/, /th/, /p/, /f/, /n/) without any explanation for why these sounds are worth learning but others are not. Although it might be reasonable to assume that these are among the sounds likely to cause problems for learners of English, learners from different native language backgrounds may have difficulties with other or additional sounds. Furthermore, Jenkins (2002) asserts that all consonantal sounds apart from /θ/ and /ð/ are core sounds for intelligibility.

There are several other shortcomings of the program. First, when learners browse the program to see what is next or maybe what they have completed so far, the video or audio content of the screen begins to play by default even if the user does not actually intend to work on that lecture or exercise. Second, the program advertises a presentation of American, British, and Australian varieties of English. However, all lectures are given in American English with British and Australian English presented, without explanation, in only a few listening exercises. This method of presentation is insufficient and is unlikely to help learners become aware of the differences between them. One possibility for *PiE* would be to provide the entire content of the program in these three variations in separate interfaces. Learners and teachers could then choose the English variety they prefer to focus on. The third shortcoming of the program is that although it has an adequate number of exercises focusing on each instructed skill, the interaction aspect is quite limited, and most of the program's exercises are decontextualized mechanical drills. *PiE* is not equipped with an automatic speech recognition (ASR) engine to ensure the program provides appropriate answers to speakers like a human interlocutor would in interactive dialogues. Therefore, the program does not have the capability to support real user interaction. Finally, *PiE* provides learners with limited feedback as it merely evaluates their receptive skills. However, developers of the program could have employed ASR to provide immediate responses, or speech analysis technology could have been used to provide visual feedback to learners.

Conclusion

PiE can be useful primarily in assisting independent learners in improving the suprasegmental features of their pronunciation. It is also appropriate for test preparation, such as TOEFL and IELTS, since these tests seem to emphasize suprasegmental features for speech intelligibility. Teachers could certainly use this

program to increase learners' opportunities for out-of-class suprasegmental practice while keeping track of students' improvement. However, if teachers were to use this program with a class, they would need to reinforce the program by providing more personalized feedback on learners' production.

Acknowledgement

References

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About the Reviewer

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