

[Software Review]

Practical Writing

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Publisher	Clarity Language Consultants, Ltd. Hong Kong office PO box 163, Sai Kung, Hong Kong Fax: +852 2791 6484 email: info@clarityenglish.com www.clarityenglish.com/pw
Language(s)	English
Products offered by Clarity English	- Active Reading - Road to IELTS - Clear Pronunciation 1 - Clear Pronunciation 2 - Dynamic Placement Test - Practical Writing - Tense Buster
Level	Three levels based on Common European Framework Reference (CEFR) levels: B1, B2, and C1.
Target Audience	English language learners (ELLs)
Operating System(s)	-The program is fully HTML5-compatible. -Supported browsers: Chrome, Safari, Edge, and Firefox - Supported devices: Desktop, laptop, iPad/tablet, and mobile devices.
Price	There is one free unit trial on the website. There are two types of licenses: - Learner Tracking and Anonymous Access Licenses - Learner Tracking license is designed for teacher-led course To purchase a license for a group or network, contact: info@clarityenglish.com.

Language learners need technologies that can help them to practice their written language in a convenient and motivating manner. One program that can support English language learners (ELLs) with their writing is *Practical Writing (PW)*. PW is one of Clarity Language Consultant Ltd.'s products, and it is an online writing program for intermediate-level English learners. This review is developed with ELLs in mind. For this purpose, the criteria for this review have been developed using the English Language Arts Standards from the Common Core State Standards (CCSS).

In this review, a general description of the PW program will be offered in the first section. This will be followed by an explanation of the program’s key features. The evaluation section will evaluate PW using writing standards from (CCSS) – ELAS. Finally, the review will provide a summary of the findings based on the criteria.

General Program Description

PW is a program designed to assist ELLs in improving their writing skills. *PW* emphasizes real-life writing topics that are essential for living, studying, and working in English-speaking environments. It also supports both formal and informal written language like writing emails, job applications, and taking notes. It focuses on the proficiencies and structures employed in academic writing and the essential texts often utilized in individuals’ professional and personal lives.

This program uses the Common European Framework Reference (CEFR) levels, and the program covers three levels of writing (B1, B2, and C1). This means that, generally, this program has three levels: intermediate, upper-intermediate, and pre-advanced. This course can equal IELTS scores of 4.0-4.5, 5.5-6.0, and 7.0 - 7.5.

PW has ten units that cover ten different topics and themes (see Figure 1 for all unit topics and their learning targets). Each unit has four parts, starting with an opening video of the unit that covers the underlying goals and objectives (Figure 2 shows the four main parts in each unit). Nine units cover various text types, while there is one as an independent unit about plagiarism. Each unit is designed to facilitate a broad topic on a specific focus. For instance, “Emails” looks at the practice of asking for information, while “A short report” asks users to review hotels and restaurants. Also, PW addresses more formal and informal writing such as “Taking notes” and “Official letters.” Despite the differences in topics and themes, all the units are designed to emphasize goals and objectives, including structures of various text types, grammar, and practical language, and reviewing skills such as proofreading.

Figure 1
The Ten Units Covered in PW

Essays: for and against	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Text type • Learning targets 	Argumentative essays Understanding the writing process, with a focus on brainstorming, planning, writing and checking; developing a formal essay style; improving spelling
Job applications: your online profile	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Text type • Learning targets 	Online profiles for job/college applications Learning to structure a text effectively; building up an online profile; developing proofreading skills; understanding punctuation
Emails: asking for information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Text type • Learning targets 	Emails (enquiries and responses) Identifying and learning functional language by heart; understanding the structure of an email; addressing people from different cultures
A short report: graphs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Text type • Learning targets 	Short reports based on graphs and charts Choosing the correct tense (past or present); prepositions of time; the language of approximation; describing proportions
A short report: hotels and restaurants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Text type • Learning targets 	Hotel and restaurant reviews Learning to structure a review; using accurate vocabulary for hotels and restaurants; choosing tenses; writing topic sentences
Plagiarism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus • Learning targets 	Avoiding plagiarism Understanding what plagiarism is; using reporting verbs to introduce ideas; rewriting ideas in your own words; using reported speech
Taking notes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Text type • Learning targets 	Notes Experimenting with layout; using abbreviations; identifying the important points; preparing to take notes; consistency and parallel structure
Essays: descriptive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Text type • Learning targets 	Descriptive essays Choosing a structure based on the essay topic; using vocabulary connected to the senses; choosing “precise” words; linking ideas
Textspeak	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Text type • Learning targets 	Text messages and chat Focusing on the reader; writing and responding appropriately; understanding text terms; using spoken language in texts; using Textspeak in social media
Official letters	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Text type • Learning targets 	Letters to government departments; job application letters Understanding the layout of an official letter; learning to use formal style; structuring a letter; choosing the correct tense (present perfect or simple past)

Figure 2
The Four Parts of the Unit



Features

The program starts each unit with an opening video of a teacher explaining the unit goals, objectives, and additional resources. Then PW supports ELLs to practice and evaluate their written English by themselves. To do so, PW is embedded with several features that facilitate learning by action (by doing/ hands-on) in that the content in each module is unveiled through a series of activities. For example, PW offers descriptions and explanations to users covering different writing skills elements, and it also offers feedback on the various learning activities, including “true or false,” “find the error,” “find and correct,” and “drag and drop.” The feedback gives users hints and immediate responses that may help them to understand the goals and objectives of the activity such as grammar used and spelling. Most of the activity pages have interactive elements and integrate colored texts with complementary popups for clarification; these features allow users to get more information. Users can also click on hyperlinks that lead to pages for explanations if they need them. These integrated learning features provide clear feedback for both incorrect and correct responses to let the user know if they have met the activities’ objectives (see Figures 3 and 4 for screenshots of the feedback messages). Further, “Resource Bank” materials are available as PDF files; this means that users can print them and use them physically; writing out long-form exercises and creating sample responses could be extra activities for learners.

Figure 3
Feedback Message for Incorrect Answer

Figure 4
Feedback Message for Correct Answer

The screenshot shows a lesson page titled "Choosing tenses (1)". The main heading is "When do we use the present tense?". Below this, there are three numbered questions with multiple-choice options. A modal window titled "Question 1" is overlaid on the page, displaying a green checkmark and the text "Well done". The feedback message states: "We use the present simple to describe graphs and reports, and what they show: The graph shows the average temperature in Dubai from January to December." A "Close" button is at the bottom of the modal.

Finally, the PW's "Progress Center" is the main support for assisting with self-assessment and performance feedback. Users can visit the "Progress Center" to view the activities completed, their scores in individual units, and the time they spent on each activity, and they can even compare their scores to other learners at any time (Figures 5, 6, and 7 illustrate how users can see their progress).

Figure 5
The Score Details Page

Unit	Exercise	Score	Date	Time (mins)
Taking notes	Taking notes: abbreviations	100%	8 March 2021	4
Taking notes	Taking notes: the layout	N/A	8 March 2021	1
Taking notes	Taking notes: the main points	25%	8 March 2021	7
Taking notes	What will I learn?	N/A	8 March 2021	2
Emails: asking for information	Finding functional language	N/A	8 March 2021	< 1
Emails: asking for information	Write two emails	N/A	8 March 2021	< 1
Emails: asking for information	Emails: correcting mistakes	0%	8 March 2021	2

Figure 6
Percentage of Completed Activities in Each Unit

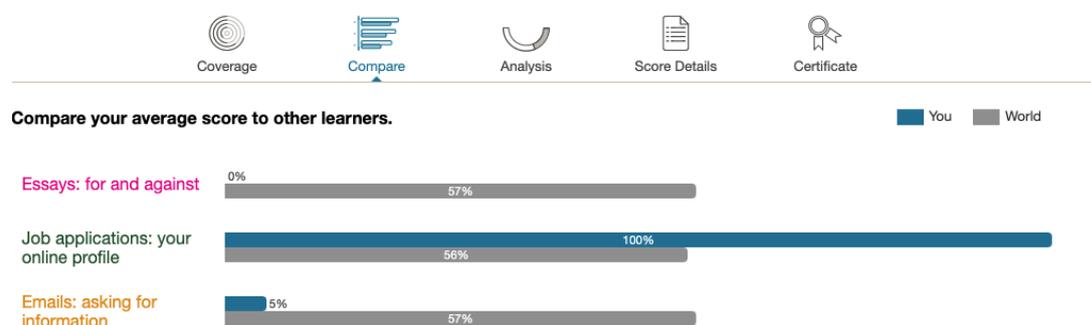
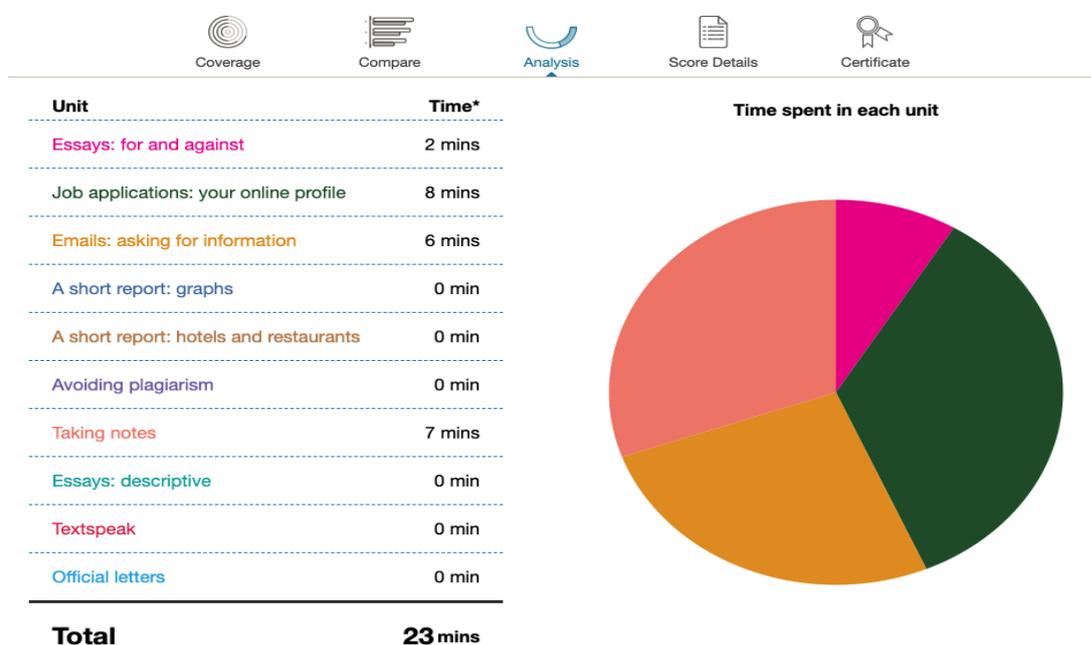


Figure 7
Time Spent on Each Activity



Evaluation

Because the intent of the program is to work with the traditional literacy of writing, this review of PW will use as criteria to what extent it meets the Common Core State Standards Initiative (CCSSI) English Language Arts Standards for writing (2021).

- **The app supports users' writing ability to create an argument (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.1)**

According to the CCSSI (2021), the ability to write an argument to support specific claims using valid reasoning and sufficient, appropriate evidence is a main writing competence. For this standard, PW presents a comprehensive unit on writing an essay where learners can engage in writing argumentative texts. The unit aims to support

students in becoming skilled writers for analyzing texts, brainstorming, planning, and applying appropriate essay styles. For instance, the unit has exercises where users can identify main aspects of a text, understand argumentative texts, and develop suitable topic sentences and essay planning activities (see Figure 8 for the learning target and text type of the Essays unit). They also get an opportunity to learn about the validity of claims by assessing the reliability of the examples and explanations provided, besides other activities that scaffold users' ideas (Figure 9 shows the assigned activities in the unit). Therefore, by the end of this unit, users can be prepared by the assigned activities to write two or more for and against essays and meet this standard.

Figure 8

Learning Targets in the Essays Unit

The screenshot shows a rounded rectangular box with a light gray background. On the left side, the text 'Essays: for and against' is written in a bold, pink font. To the right of this text, there are two bullet points, each with a pink dot. The first bullet point is labeled 'Text type' and has the value 'Argumentative essays'. The second bullet point is labeled 'Learning targets' and has the value 'Understanding the writing process, with a focus on brainstorming, planning, writing and checking; developing a formal essay style; improving spelling'.

Figure 9

List of Activities in the For and Against Unit.

The screenshot shows a vertical list of activities under the heading 'Essays: for and against', which is accompanied by a pink pencil icon. The activities are listed in a series of rounded rectangular buttons. The first three buttons are dark pink and each has a white checkmark icon on the right side, indicating they are completed. The remaining buttons are light pink. The activities listed are: 'What will I learn?', 'Stages of writing', 'Brainstorming (1)', 'Brainstorming (2)', 'Planning your essay (1)', 'Planning your essay (2)', 'Choosing a style', 'Write an essay', 'Check your first draft', 'Test your spelling', 'Quick quiz: the writing process', and 'And finally...'.

- **The app supports users' ability to develop and organize specific written tasks for suitable purposes and audiences (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.4)**

PW's backbone is the variety of convenient activities in the "Practice Zone" and "Resource Bank." Through these features, PW can guide learners through crucial and productive (practical) writing activities. For instance, in the "Essays" module, learners can be engaged in essay planning and drafting and brainstorming activities. Also, learners can learn how to write essay headings and develop effective topic sentences. Moreover, PW includes formal and informal writing that supports different writing styles that can be

used based on the learner's purposes. Learners can learn the differences between writing informal texts, such as social media posts and letters to friends, and writing formal material, such as job applications and reports. Further, learners have the opportunity to acquire appropriate words or styles for specific contexts. The program includes planning activities in most units to assist users to organize their final unit essay. Accordingly, the app meets this criterion to help write organized essays for appropriate audiences.

- **The app supports users to integrate the internet and technology to communicate and share their written language (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.6)**

In the modern context, any English learning platform must have some structures for supporting digital literacy (Van Deursen & Van Dijk, 2014). Based on this criterion, an effective English language writing platform should integrate technologies such as the internet to share learners' writing products. PW has directed an effort to enhance learners' digital competence by offering some activities that require learners to integrate the internet. For instance, the "Job Applications," "Emails," and "Short Reports" units have exercises where learners have to visit websites and then create texts such as career profiles, inquiries, responses to emails, and hotel reviews. Within these tasks, PW offers functional language for learners to use in their writing and communications. So, PW provides opportunities to learn and practice communication and digital competencies, such as typing, emailing, reporting and using internet search skills. However, this criterion is incompletely met because PW offers learners many activities to practice but they cannot share their writing to get feedback.

Discussion

This online program has tangible features that support ELLs, such as focusing on real-life written language, self-learning (autonomy) and self-assessment, and immediate feedback. PW is easy to use by learners, and it has clear goals and a description of activities and handouts in all units.

The PW focuses on real-life written language. This feature offers the opportunity for students to apply the English language in a different context in their writings. It also encourages learners to write more authentically to their life (Nguyen & Phan, 2020). Mastery of the English language allows students to broaden their world perspectives (Pennycook, 2017). Hence, PW emphasizes real-life writing subjects necessary for studying, working, and living in English-speaking environments. Learners may use the program to document real-world examples of course material.

Self-learning (autonomy) and self-assessment are essential concepts in PW. This program has built-in features that enable learners to learn by action and to consider their answers. They can unveil the content in each module by engaging in a series of activities, for which they receive feedback to show them the areas where they should practice more. PW offers learners immediate feedback; such feedback can enhance self-awareness and support holistic competence in learners (Kourgiantakis et al., 2018). PW also provides students with feedback on all learning activities. This feedback offers learners hints and immediate responses needed to comprehend the course contents.

Then, PW provides self-assessment guidelines. In learning language, self-assessment helps learners to recognize and underline their needs (Pradeep, 2019). In this self-assessment, PW takes students through main components to ensure that learners have these components in their writing. For example, it asks them if they have an introduction, supporting details. In other words, PW does not provide direct comments to students' actual writing; but it provides these guidelines (as shown in Figure 10) as a way to self-assess their writing. Also, self-assessment is an authentic evaluation approach implemented in English as a foreign language teaching pedagogy to provide learners with chances to reflect on their learning (Andrade, 2019; Ratminingsih et al., 2018). However, PW allows students to enhance their writing competency by following these guidelines in their free writing.

Figure 10

List of guidelines that student use to assess their writing.

When you have written your first draft, you need to check it. But what are you looking for? Click on the following items to find out more.

1. Have you **answered the question**?
2. Does your essay have a **good structure**?
3. Are all your points **relevant**?
4. Have you supported your **main points**?
5. Do you help the reader by using **signpost words**?
6. Have you used a **good range of vocabulary**?
7. Have you used a **good range of grammar**?
8. Can you see any **small errors**?

Task
When you have answered the questions, rewrite your essay. Then click below and read three model essays. Think about what you can learn from them.

Study sheet

Despite the numerous benefits of the PW program, there are some drawbacks. First, one disadvantage of this program is that it is not free, and the price is not mentioned in the program web page. Second, teachers only have the Admin Panel where they can see students' progress. However, teachers cannot change the program content if they want, and they cannot see students' free writes. Accordingly, learners cannot upload their writing to analyze them and receive relevant content feedback online.

As a tool for English language classrooms, teachers can not promote the use of the PW program in class. Teachers can ask learners to use it before or after the class to support learners as in the blended learning strategies. Moreover, it could be helpful for self-learning learners to improve their social writing and ability to focus on real-life written language, get feedback, and practice self-learning and self-assessment.

Conclusion

PW program meets the CCSSI (2021) criteria by offering opportunities for users to learn about and apply written English language in different contexts. The systematic, highly flexible design of the program, built-in assessment metrics, and feedback features are vital instruments in the program. These activities could make the program a suitable tool for autonomous learners. Additionally, teachers may use the program to support ELLs' academic and non-academic writing skills in and outside the classroom. Since this review is targeting ELLs, here is the ways this app can support their language learning in writing ability to create an argument, develop and organize specific written tasks for suitable purposes and audiences, and integrate the internet and technology to communicate and share their written language. Overall, PW's clean design and consistent focus on real-life text types and activities make it a useful tool for English language classrooms.

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