

[Software Review]

“Study Skills Success”

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Language(s)	English
Other products offered by Clarity English	Active Reading, Road to IELTS, Clear Pronunciation 1, Clear Pronunciation 2, Dynamic Placement Test, Practical Writing, and Tense Buster. All products are available with multiple free resources and support materials for classroom use
Level	Intermediate to advanced levels; best-suited for 16+ learners.
Activities	Activities include, but are not limited to, listening, speaking, reading, writing, time-management, prioritization, knowledge activation, giving presentations, evaluating websites, note-taking, creating visuals, describing visual data, and citing academic sources.
Media Format	Supported devices are smart phones, tablets, iPads, desktops, and laptops; the product is application based.
Operating System(s)	Network versions require Windows 7/8/10. Online versions are hosted by ClarityEnglish. Browser requires Chrome v51, Firefox v47, Safari v9.0, or Edge v40. Later updated versions are also compatible with courseware.
Hardware Requirements	Good quality earphones, speakers, and soundcard.
Documentation	Accessed from: http://www.clarityenglish.com/program/studyskillssuccess/
Price	A trial account is available upon an email request; access of full version of the app is granted only upon purchase. Purchase of the network versions is a one-off: there are no recurring costs within the version. Price differs according to country and provider.

Study Skills Success, developed by Clarity Language Consultants Ltd, is one digital, pedagogic, interactive, CALL software program designed for ESL/EFL learners' academic study skills that has grown quickly since its launch (and has recently been upgraded). It is adopted globally by the British Council, according to the 2018 Clarity Guide to online English. It targets intermediate to advanced (B1–C1 according to Common European Framework of reference) teenage-to-adult learners of English at both high school and higher education levels. This all-in-one program functions as a comprehensive course in academic study skills; it focuses attention on the four language skills, grammar, vocabulary, critical thinking, independent learning, research, and

visuals (See Figure 1). Given the broad coverage of different language and study skills areas in the ten-unit syllabus it hosts, Study Skills Success can be used as a stand-alone, comprehensive study skills course—a course that suits both native speakers and non-native speakers of English alike. Not only does it serve as a comprehensive package for promoting autonomous test-taking strategies, but it fits as an extensive, self-access remedial supplement to an existing EAP course or as a software program to build an academic course around as well.

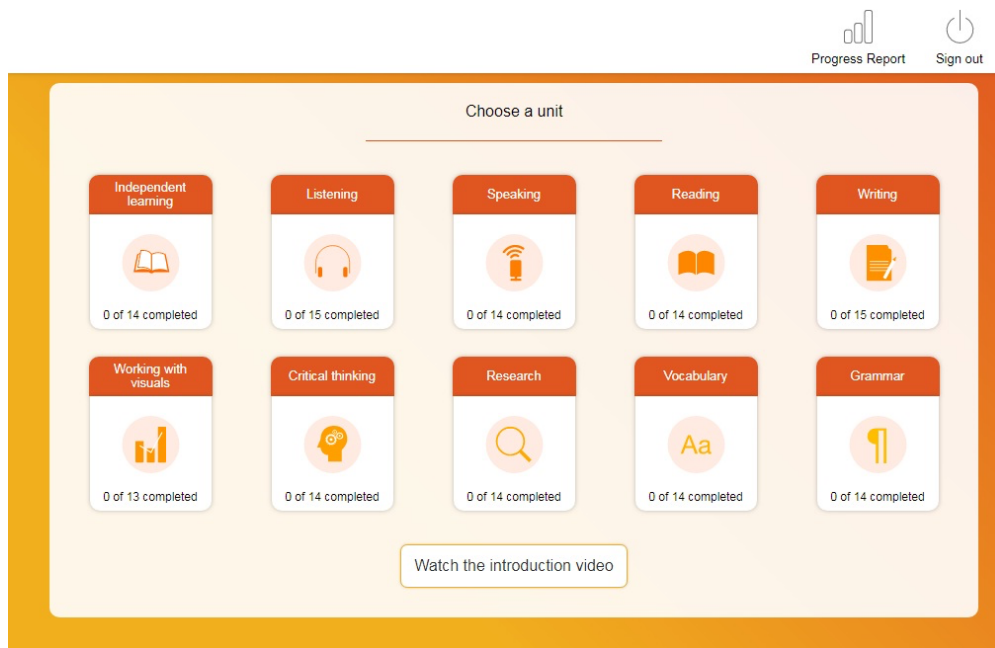


Figure 1: Full Spectrum of Study Skills Success Units

Each Study Skills Success unit begins with a video introduction where a teacher explains a challenge that learners are likely to encounter. In the Speaking unit, for instance, the teacher explains: “You’ll have to speak to tutors; you’ll have to speak in seminars; and you’ll certainly have to speak to other students about work—and socially.” Walking learners through the technological features of the software, and the pedagogical affordances it fosters, is a direct way of engaging them in a user-friendly manner. The unit then walks learners through a series of teaching points and interactive activities in four areas: speaking out, giving opinions, giving a presentation, and discussing ideas. Students conclude by completing oral and written learning records that are accessible for later inspection or review. The other nine units follow a similar progression.

Evaluation

Technological Features

Study Skills Success is an account-registered, user-friendly, and easy-to-install tutorial with an overall transparent layout design, screen displays, and usability features, hence offering a pleasant user experience. The engaging layout design facilitates learners’

access to the program's multi-purpose features through single sign-on, password-protected portals found at <http://www.clarityenglish.com/online/login.php> (See Figure 2). After downloading the program and clicking the Start button, the user is taken to the Menu page that features the ten units, the right-side Progress Report icon and the Sign out link; all the icons are handy and easy to manipulate. The courseware is remarkably flexible; learners can easily access and exit a lesson (upon/without completion), move forward or backward within the same unit, work on different units simultaneously, choose to do or skip an activity, do print-outs, record oral responses, trace progress record over a period of time, use the notepad for notes and reminders, etc.

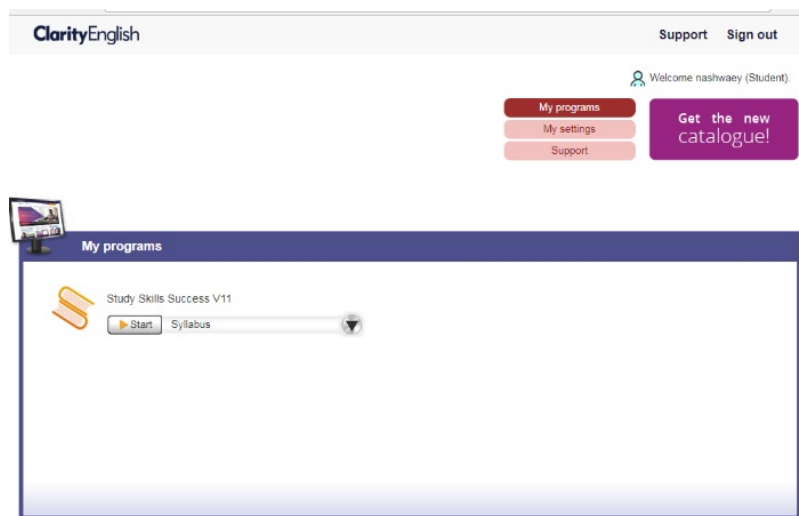


Figure 2: Single sign-on, password-protected portals

Moreover, the full-color screen displays are easy-to-read. Each unit display has a uniform layout, which helps students familiarize themselves with the program. The fonts are an appropriate size and do not strain the eye; they are in boldface whenever used for rubrics or instructions to catch the students' attention. In every unit, learners see a left-side menu that hosts five fixed features: Learning objectives, Progress, Notepad, Print, and Recorder (See Figure 3). The images, graphics, charts, and other illustrative tools, along with the instructions, are always visible on the activity screen display for learners to read and re-read at will. The multimedia voices and sounds are audibly clear and intelligible. Motivator multimedia sounds are appropriate for the target age group; however, the correct/incorrect notifications can be turned on or off to accommodate different learners' preferences while busy on-task. Once users select a unit, they are exposed to three fixed features visible on the interface: Starting Out, Practice Zone, and Resource Bank. The Practice Zone, aligned with multiple lower- and higher-order thinking skills, sketches the sub-skills underlying each unit, while the Resource Bank highlights the built-in study sheets and learning records of the learner.

Figure 3: Unique features of Study Skills Success units

Pedagogical Features

An important aspect of the courseware in review is the “learning to learn” featured units that help elevate users’ self-regulated learning in terms of thinking, motivation, and behavior during the learning process (Pintrich, 2004). Scholarly work on self-regulated learning advocates positive impacts on retention, self-efficacy, and academic achievement (Wang, Kollar, & Stegmann, 2017). In this skill-integrated courseware, each unit begins with the Introduction sub-title and input activities and progresses to practice exercises capitalizing on the sub-skills pertaining to each of the ten language areas in focus. Some of the units have weblinks to additional activities consistent with the tutorial’s learning objectives. More specifically, Study Skills Success harnesses learning that is guided by *metacognition* (thinking about one’s thinking), *strategic action* (planning, monitoring, and evaluating personal progress against a benchmark), and *motivation to learn*. On using Study Skills Success, self-regulated learners receive opportunities for language and study skills development through engaging activities ranging from basic to advanced levels of difficulty.

Inspired by and aligned with the ACTFL five C’s (Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities), Study Skills Success stresses the need to expand the learning of a language beyond the instructional setting. The wide range of *authentic materials* afforded by the courseware, namely in the Reading and Vocabulary units, help immerse learners in rich contexts that foster opportunities for experimentation with the target language/culture and negotiation of meaning. Study Skills Success uses authentic texts and all the topics introduced in the software program are academic, comprehensible to non-specialists, culturally appropriate, and pertinent to

language learners. In addition, the courseware affords learners full record-keeping of the completed activities, the scores obtained, and the time spent on-task, to better identify their strengths and weaknesses (See Figure 4). The Marking feature provides them with immediate, explanatory feedback (of adequate degree) that helps them realize their mistakes and why they occur. They can take notes of these mistakes in their notepad as a reminder for later consolidation activities. Using the Marking feature, teachers can keep print-outs of their learners' records and track their progress on an individual or whole group basis. They can create, delete, reorder, and amend multimedia activities that cater for learners' multiple differences, learning styles and strategies, as well as interests.

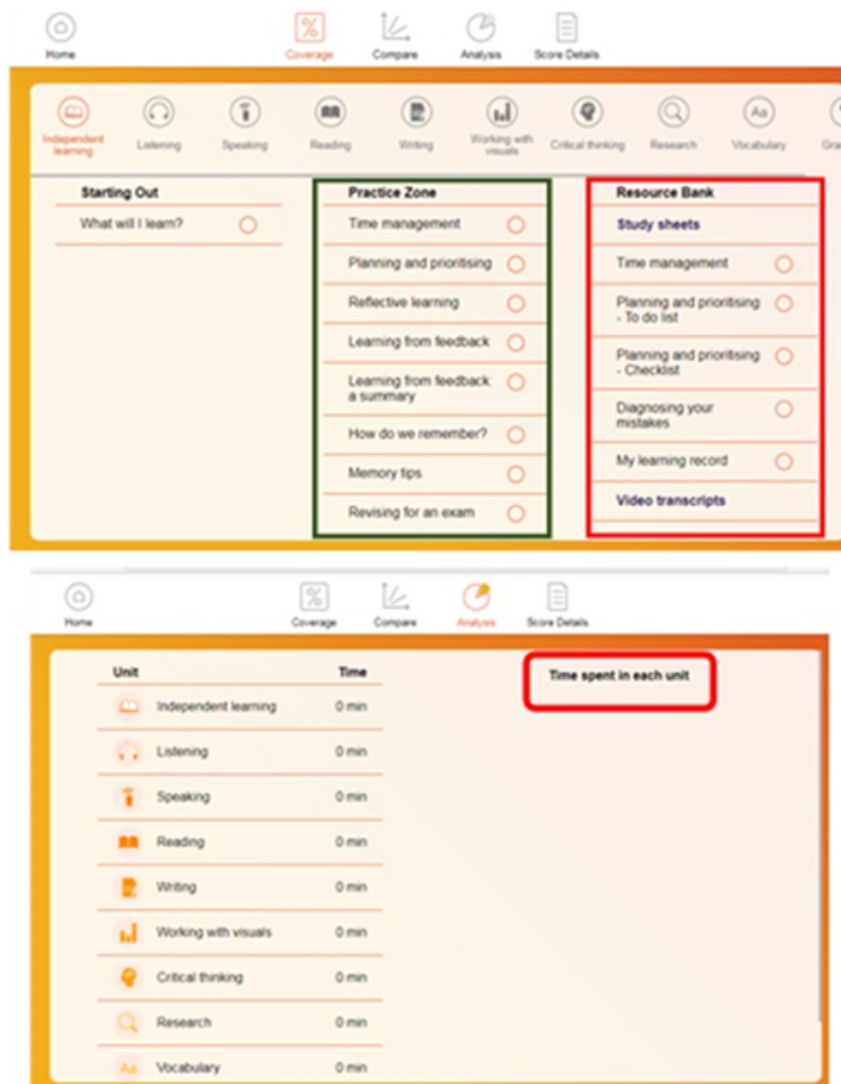


Figure 4: Record-keeping Features of Study Skills Success

Teacher Fit (Approach)

Triggered by the impetus to maximize comprehensible input and language learning opportunities for learners through hands-on, meaningful experiences within or outside

classroom walls, Study Skills Success is premised on the tenets of socio-cultural theory, experiential learning, and situated learning frameworks. As such, the courseware encompasses opportunities for risk-taking and creativity, collaborative and autonomous learning. Teachers, within this context, are facilitators, mentors, and assessors rather than resources and purveyors of knowledge. They are encouraged to keep records of learners' performances in the Study Skills Success courseware using teaching journals, lessons reports, surveys and questionnaires, and audio/video recordings for later reflection, sharing with peers, and professional development.

The different autonomous and collaborative assessment techniques afforded by Study Skills Success can be effectively employed to help teachers provide language learners with adequate technology-enhanced learning opportunities, broader capabilities for experiential learner-led activities, and creativity through role-plays and simulations in real-life situations. This, in turn, extends social interactions and collaboration among peers, hence promoting a sense of shared social presence. In the process of learning using Study Skills Success, teachers should ensure ample time and space for experimentation with the language, for multiple modes of interaction, and for individualized, personalized, and user-generated content in their exposure to authentic multimedia content and culture.

Study Skills Success lends itself to many classroom applications. Numerous interactional patterns can be used to better employ the rich teaching presence afforded by the software. In a "Reading" unit, for instance, one learner can take the place of the teacher and lead a reading-based discussion with their peers, reinforcing key concepts in the passage as well as new vocabulary items or chunks for them to notice and use during the discussion. At a less-controlled stage of a listening class using a Study Skills Success "Listening" unit, the learners can be encouraged to pair or cluster in small groups and role-play unscripted scenarios of relevance to the class topic, based on prompts provided by the teacher. Eventually, learners can take votes for the best role play in accordance with a clearly stated assessment rubric. Students constantly learn by doing, either individually or collaboratively. When used to promote pair and group collaborations, the software reinforces the importance of "scaffolding" and "mediation" that is integral to effective language learning.

Through an active use of the software program and effective manipulation of the interactive interface, learners can develop ICT skills and positive perceptions of technology-enhanced learning and assessment (Chapelle, 1998; Hubbard, 1996, 2006). They can keep pace with recent innovative digital assessment formats of standardized proficiency and/or achievement tests; polish their (a)synchronous computer-mediated skills at ease and at a fast pace; and most importantly, develop the required skills for blended classrooms whereby online and digital tools are integrated into a traditional learning setting. On a different note, the topics and content-specific, cross-curricular input featured in the Reading, Vocabulary, and Listening units builds on their schemata and world knowledge. The "Visuals" unit further enhances their interpretations of visual data presented in various forms such as tables, charts, graphics, statistics, or other media of illustration. The elaborate and rich input provided by the tutorial help to make the key linguistic/skill-based characteristics in focus as salient as possible.

Learner-Fit (Design)

Study Skills Success helps learners develop responsibility for their own language learning, take part in student-led tasks and activities, and cooperate and collaborate with their peers in implementing classroom tasks and extracurricular activities. For instance, in a reading class, they can use the reading passage as the basis for a final debate between two teams in active discussion of a related dilemma. They are to develop well-grounded arguments and be good at rebuttal. The two teams start the debate using the notes they extracted as the base for their arguments and after sharing with colleagues how they will defend their views.

Some common ground is expected to be reached at the closure of this debate.

It is noteworthy that the six cognitive skills of Bloom, Engelhart, Furst, Hill, and Krathwohl's (1984) taxonomy, ranging from lower-order skills that require less cognitive processing to higher-order skills that require deeper learning and a greater degree of cognitive processing, are accounted for in the software. In the "Independent learning" unit, for example, the "Practice Zone" section involves learners in planning and prioritizing, reflective learning, and learning from feedback. Learners begin with basic knowledge and comprehension questions to demonstrate their abilities of recalling fundamental facts and understanding key ideas by organizing, comparing, translating, interpreting, and stating main ideas. Eventually, they become adept at problem-solving, inference-making, opinion-evaluating among other refined critical reading skills. As a closure, students can role-play scenarios of relevance to the class topic. They can be encouraged to use some of the new ideas and new vocabulary/expressions or chunks in their simulations and the class votes for the best acting out.

Additionally, Study Skills Success seeks to attend to learners' different learning styles, strategies, and interests. For instance, a class pair work activity can be arranged while working on lessons in the "Listening" unit. Each of the students can do the activity individually, then sit together to double check responses and negotiate meaning. This can be followed by them checking responses using the "Marking" feature. They can start by working autonomously on a specific grammar skill (e.g. subordination and coordination) then meet up in a semi-structured discussion group (which I call "Critical Friendship Circle") to offer critique on practice using a protocol of their own (or developed by their class teacher) to practice the appropriate language of giving constructive positive and/or negative feedback.

Conclusion

Study Skills Success is an engaging courseware that can be used as a stand-alone, a supplemental tutorial, or a software program around which to build a course. The ease of installation, operation, and manipulation of the tutorial makes it ideal for class work, especially in self-access labs. Its intuitive and transparent interface, along with the built-in activities and special features, helps learners engage in quality time on-task activities. The built-in activities can help extend social interactions and collaboration among

students or provide immersive and experiential language learning opportunities for self-directed learners. The lack of contextual elements, on the one hand, and the less frequent integrated tasks, on the other, makes it difficult for the software to function as the sole source for second language learning. In order for learners to carry out authentic interactive conversation in real-life scenarios, teacher intervention is key. Despite these limitations, Study Skills Success is an added value program that can be used in CALL labs in open access hours or under the guidance of an instructor.

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