

Study Skills Success

evaluated by...
schoolzone.co.uk

Overview

"Study Skills Success" is a complete study skills course aimed at students in the final years of secondary education. It covers lectures, note-taking, analysing an assignment, planning and writing it, as well as developing students' ability to improve their grammar and broaden their vocabulary. "Study Skills Success" comes complete with its own website which not only provides extension activities, but also gives links to other sites of general academic interest. The website is particularly useful in the research unit where students go live on the Web to research searching and evaluation techniques.

Although the software was originally designed to complement the IELTS course (International English Language Testing System), the skills addressed are universal, and sit comfortably within the remit of GCSE.

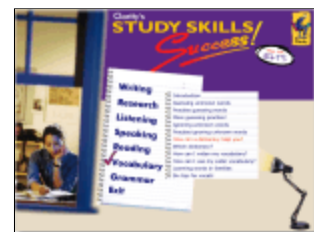
To make full use of the CDs technology and web support, it should be networked, although it can be used as a standalone resource. The benefits of networking include the ability to access the assessment program and see each student's progress at a glance.

Because it is an interactive CD-ROM, it will prove valuable in the differentiation process, enabling those students who find it easier to learn from a computer screen. The sections are bright and attractive, and instructions on screen are clear and helpful.

Written by

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Image



Publisher

Clarity Language
Consultants Ltd

Subject

Cross Curricular

Key Stage

Key Stage 4 / S3 - S4

Post-16 / S4 - S5

Product Code

CLAR-STUDYSKILLS

Classroom use

Context

The focus group for the evaluation was a set of Year 10 students, preparing for GCSE English. Their ability at this stage of their study is within the GCSE range B-D. The software was trialled with this group over a period of 8 weeks, with a minimum of one fifty-minute lesson per week, but often two. Most of the work was done in the computer room, but this was supported by lessons in the conventional classroom setting.

Because it fitted in with the Scheme of Work they were following at the time, I chose to focus on the Reading and Writing sections during the evaluation period. As the students worked at different rates, those who finished early were asked to work through the Vocabulary and Grammar sections on their own.



Labour saving aspects

After spending some time getting to know the software, I found the program very labour saving. Most students just got on with it without any intervention on my part. At time I felt totally superfluous in the computer room: the program is fairly self explanatory, with only the occasional request to explain vocabulary or settle disagreements about the answers. As a result, I spent my time walking around with my markbook, asking students to click on the "Progress" link. All the marking had been done for me!

Learning outcomes

The students had the opportunity to approach the skills of Reading and Writing from a totally different perspective. It reinforced good practice which had already been taught and it introduced students to some concepts which they had not encountered before, such as the PQRS method of analysing a question title.

Perhaps more significantly, it introduced one or two students to the concept of supported self study, as some went back to using the program during their own time.

Student Response

Students were excited at the idea of doing some of their English on computers, and, on the whole, remained on task, even after the initial enthusiasm had died down. A minority lost interest in the amount of reading from screen they were meant to do and went through the exercises half-heartedly, keen to see what came next rather than actively learn from their experience. However, it must be said that these particular pupils find concentration difficult and therefore, this is not a reflection on the quality of the software.

Universally, the instantaneous marking feature proved to be popular, and created a sense of healthy competition among students sitting next to each other, with individuals comparing each other's answers, and a degree of spontaneous discussion and disagreement about the "correct" answers. This prompted focused interchanges of views, which was an unexpected bonus.

Once I began to recognise that a few students were "playing" with the software rather than progressing through the course seriously, I was able to play my trump card, and warned them that, not only could they see their results, but I could also, using the accompanying "Results Manager" software, and I would be able to use the data in their forthcoming reports. This had the desired effect and brought about some feverish backtracking through the program!

Views on the "voiceover" varied: a minority were cynical, but the majority said that it saved time and effort in reading, and made the instructions clearer.

During the periodic evaluation sessions, the overall response was favourable, fitting in well with the concept of a variety of teaching and learning styles. Learning from a computer screen is helpful to some students, especially those who value the opportunity to review their work and "get it right".

Weaker students found some of the vocabulary difficult, and UK students are not particularly used to expressions like "modals", which, once again, reinforced the impression that this course, although helpful, was not intended for GCSE students. Students working at the mid to higher levels did not find the occasional vocabulary issue intrusive or inhibiting.

Getting to grips with the ICT skills expected was easy after some initial hesitation. As most of the skills (drag & drop, where to type answers, etc.) are uniform to the rest of the program, students only had to find out how to do it once and then they were fine.

Unquestionably, the most heartening comments were by two students who asked whether the software could be available for them to use in their own time. In my judgement, this is how the software could be used most effectively, where more motivated students can use it to enhance their own learning.

Assessment and pupil tracking opportunities

As mentioned elsewhere, assessment is built into the program and can be accessed either on an individual basis or by using "Results Manager" software.

This is a terrific feature of "Study Skills Success" as students can track their own progress at will. The teacher can also track progress using the built in database on an individual or whole-group basis.

Special needs

Although there are some very good features in the software, Special Needs students would find this course tough, as it expects a fairly high degree of literacy as well as good reading and listening skills, which are likely to impede progress for students who find these skills difficult.

That said, the multimedia element is useful in conveying understanding and the opportunities to check answers at will, along with the option of trying again, can help weaker students to understand where they have gone wrong. However, this, in itself demands a certain amount of self-discipline when set against the temptation to move on and see what comes next!

The Authoring program (see the "Curriculum Coverage" section) allows teachers to add exercises using the same format as the exercises in "Study Skill Success", which could easily be geared to students' particular needs.

Content and design

Schemes of work supported

The skills addressed in the software are fairly universal skills for most courses being followed by students aged 15-18. However, it was designed for the IELTS course, and this is where I was a little disappointed in the software for use by GCSE students. The software is clearly badged for IELTS and the user gets constant reminders that this course was not specifically tailored to his or her use.

There is a permanently visible link entitled "IELTS Tie-In", which gives additional information on how the specific unit "ties in" with the IELTS examination. This, again, serves as a reminder to the users that this software is not specific to them, and runs the risk of creating the impression that it is, therefore, not relevant. Obviously, the skills ARE relevant, but I had to do some persuading to the focus group of students to convince them that Reading, Writing and Grammar skills, etc are universal.

The voices used in the multimedia were clear, but not all the accents are native to the British Isles, which tended to distance the course that little bit further from UK students.

I would suggest that a little rebadging of the software with a "GCSE Tie-In" link would go a long way towards making UK students feel that it was relevant to their schemes of work.



Literacy

The entire program is geared towards the development of Literacy skills - whether it be Reading, Writing or Listening. However, it does anticipate a medium to high level of Literacy in the first place, as some of the articles accompanying the exercises are demanding.

The fact that information is read to students helps with understanding, making it more accessible to weaker students.

Numeracy

Although Numeracy is not within the remit of this software, Numeracy skills are addressed in the unit entitled "Visuals", which deals with interpreting data from tables, charts, graphs and statistics.

Design and navigation

This is a lovely piece of software to use. As mentioned elsewhere, it went through the trial period without a hitch and proved to be very stable.

Once loaded, you are taken to the Menu page which has a list of the eight units as well as an exit link. Two nice little touches are the lamp that moves up and down, depending upon which unit you have the cursor on, and the "clicks" make it even more obvious. Once you click on a unit title, a submenu appears, listing each of the lessons within that unit. Navigation is therefore easy and intuitive. It enables you to get back to where you finished last time in a couple of clicks.

Each screen has a uniform layout, which helped students to become familiar with the program. Permanently visible down the right hand side of the screen are hyperlinks to IELTS, which wasn't particularly helpful to GCSE students. However, the other hyperlinks did prove useful, especially the scratchpad, which can be used to write notes and reminders. Most popular of all was the "progress" link which allowed students to see their progress during that particular session or across all their work up to that point.

The multimedia aspect produced a few giggles at first, but soon settled down and proved helpful to some students who find it easier to learn by listening, rather than reading. This was supplemented by sound effects ("Oops" or applause) to signal correct or incorrect answers. Such multimedia options are not everyone's cup of tea, so there is the opportunity to turn it off!

There was some confusion in early use about how to convey the right answer, but after a short amount of practice and mutual support, they began to recognise when and how they should "drag and drop" and when and where to type.

Over all, the design, navigation and usability feature were real strengths in the program

Ease of installation

Installing "Study Skills Success" presented no problems at all. It was installed on the network with access from 30 machines within an hour. The Network Manager made use of the excellent technical and installation information on the Clarity website (www.clarity.com.hk). During the entire evaluation period, there were no problems at all on any machine.

Support materials

The support materials are excellent. On the CD ROM itself, there are help files in pdf format, and there is extensive help information permanently available under the title bar on the program itself.

In addition, the Clarity website (www.clarity.com.hk) contains links to all kinds of additional resources, including upgrades, technical information, and supportive documents for the individual units, where relevant. The links from the unit to the extra resources are also available on screen via the "weblink" icon.

Suitable for ages

14, 15, 16

Planning

The only real planning that is required involves the teacher going through the units beforehand to be available to support the students with the simple (How do I...?) questions which crop up when they first start using the program.

The only other planning issues I found were practical ones, like where each module would fit seamlessly into the existing Department's Scheme of Work - and when we could gain access to a computer room!

Otherwise, the program runs itself, and students remained on task for most of the time without much intervention.

Publisher Information

Clarity Language Consultants Ltd



Clarity has been developing effective educational software since 1992. We specialise in MFL and ESOL and currently have four series of language programs registered for COL. Our fifth COL program, Author Plus Online, enables teachers to create interactive activities for all subjects from Year 3 to Year 13 (see www.AuthorPlus.com). We provide lots of teacher support for all our programs!



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Purchasing Information

Please either send us an email directly (info@clarity.com.hk) or following the below steps:

Step 1-

Go to Clarity products page:

<http://www.clarity.com.hk/program/index.htm>

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There is a "Price enquiry" button on every page, click on it.

Step 4-

Fill in the form and our sale representative will send you the price list within one working day.